

# **On Passing – Que(e)r(y)ing the Appropriation of (Cis)gender Aesthetics by Transgender Women**

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## **DECLARATION**

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## ABSTRACT

Making use of personal memories and the narratives of transgender women of colour, this thesis explores the circumstances, dilemmas and challenges we face in relation to our gender (re)presentation and passing in society. Passing, although detrimental to transgender women and their community, exists socially as a rite of passage to womanhood, that creates tension between wanting to belong to it and arguing for a differentiated experience. This detriment is in the form of unequal access to resources and treatment, in/external community stressors and fluctuating in its requirements. In this thesis I will focus on the highly controversial and contested lives of transgender women of colour in Cape Town to increase research and highlight the multi-perspectival nature of our narratives. These narratives, from such a marginalised group, will highlight an alternative local experience that is undervalued and often not documented. Through this lens I engage with my own personal traumas and cultural ideologies that have influenced my womanhood and representation. In this thesis, the use of memory, authors, cinematic quotes, song titles and artists as well as poetry, gives a unique perspective on the creation of the self. Janet Mock's *Surpassing Certainty*, 2017, was the main inspiration for exploring passing and womanhood, in combination with Jenni Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, 1991, and Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals, *POSE*, 2018. Through these resources I re-write and read the narratives and position of transgender women in society. I switch between creative and academic writing echoing the merging of non-conformity and conformity to create successful (re)presentation of passing. Conducting interviews aided in exploring and elucidating the intersectional ways in which passing affects transgender women. The qualitative approach is in line with the structure and style of this thesis. Focus is placed on questions of access to medical, psychological, and legal services in society. This thesis is also an attempt to re-teach people and society how to think about and react to transgender women.

## OPSOMMING

Deur gebruik te maak van persoonlike herinneringe en die verhale van transgender vroue van kleur, verken ek die omstandighede, dilemmas en uitdagings wat ons in die gesig staar in verhouding tot ons gender-uitdrukking (of gender-(uit)beelding) en hoe ons ‘pass’ in die samelewing. ‘Passing’, alhoewel dit transgender vroue en hul gemeenskap benadeel, bestaan dit sosiaal as 'n oorgangsritueel na vrouwees, wat spanning skep tussen die wil daarvan en om te argumenteer vir 'n gedifferensieerde ervaring. In hierdie verhandeling fokus ek op die uiters kontroversiële en betwiste lewens van transgender vroue van kleur in Kaapstad en die wêreld, om enersyds bestaande navorsing te verruim en andersyds die veelvuldige perspektiewe oor die aard van ons verhale te belig. Die verhale van só 'n gemarginaliseerde groep sal 'n alternatiewe plaaslike ervaring op die voorgrond plaas, wat andersins nie genoegsaam waardeur en gedokumenteerd word nie. Op dié wyse betrek ek my eie persoonlike traumas en die kulturele ideologieë wat my vrouwees en uitdrukking/uitbeelding beïnvloed het. Deur gebruik te maak van herinneringe, outeurs en filmaanhalings, titels van liedjies en kunstenaars sowel as poësie, word hier 'n unieke perspektief op die skepping van die self aangebied. Janet Mock se *Surpassing Certainty* (2017) dien as vertrekpunt om ‘passing’ en vrouwees te verken. Dit word gedoen in kombinasie met Jenni Livingstone se *Paris is Burning* (1991) en Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk en Steven Canals se *POSE* (2018). Aan die hand van die voorgenome bronne, herskryf en (her)lees ek die verhale/narratiewe en posisionering van transgender vroue in die samelewing. Dit kan gesien word aan die hibriede styl van die proefskrif. Hier word die kreatiewe en akademiese skryfwyse afwisselend aangewend, wat ruimte laat om aan te voer vir die vereniging van konformiteit en nie-konformiteit, ten einde suksesvolle verteenwoordiging te bewerkstellig. Die onderhoude was 'n waardevolle hulpmiddel om die interseksionele wyses waarop ‘passing’ transgender vroue raak, te verken en te belig. Die kwalitatiewe benadering sluit aan by die struktuur en styl van die verhandeling. Die fokus val hier op voorreg en die nadeel van ‘passing’ met verwysing na toegang tot mediese, sielkundige en regsdiens in die samelewing. Hierdie verhandeling is ook 'n poging om mense en die samelewing op te voed oor hoe om met transgender vroue om te gaan.

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## GLOSSARY

This glossary of terms and their definitions as they are used in this research paper

**Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003:** A South African Act of Parliament that allows an individual to change, under certain conditions, their sex in the population registry.

**Body dysmorphia:** An obsessive focus on a perceived flaw in appearance. The flaws may range from major to imagined. The person may spend days, money, cosmetic procedures, or exercise to fix it.

**Cis-assumed:** Used as an alternative to passing, the term is used when transgender individuals are assumed to be cisgender.

**Cisgender:** A term used to describe individuals whose gender identity and sex assigned at birth are the same or congruent.

**Coloured:** (Afrikaans: Kleurlinge or Bruinmense) Defined as an individual with mixed European, African, and Asian heritage. It is a highly contested category in South Africa.

**Colourism:** A form of discrimination based on the colour of a person's skin tone. This form of discrimination or prejudice happens when members of the same race are treated differently because of certain social implications associated with colour and the meanings that have been attached to it. This is dependent on a person's proximity to whiteness.

**Deadnaming:** When a transgender individual is called, referred to, addressed, or identified by the name assigned to them at birth. A deadname is the name a transgender individual no longer uses to identify themselves.

**Disclose:** For transgender individuals – this would be to reveal or make known that they are transgender and not cisgender.

**Gender dysphoria:** The distress a person feels because of a mismatch in their gender identity and sex assigned at birth.

**Gender reassignment surgery (GRS):** The term can refer to a host of surgeries that transgender individuals undertake (facial feminization, breast augmentation etc). However, in this research paper we will assume the definition of surgery, that refers to sexual reassignment surgery with a focus on the genitals.

**Hormone replacement therapy (HRT):** Hormone therapy used by transgender individuals to medically align their gender with their secondary sexual characteristics using hormones. HRT can be done in combination with feminisation surgery.

**Intersectionality:** A theoretical framework that allows us to understand how aspects of a person's identity create a set of unique experiences that facilitate privilege and discrimination due to the interconnected and overlapping nature of it.

**Misgender(ed/ing):** When a transgender individual is referred to by the incorrect pronouns that they identify with. Often transgender people who are misgendered are referred to by the pronouns assigned to their gender identity at birth. Some may do it unconsciously, but others do so deliberately and with malicious intention. This can also be used to humiliate and subvert the identity of the trans individual.

**Passing:** The term used when a transgender individual is said to be viewed as cisgender. The term comes with a history of misuse that presupposes posing as something they are not or taking on a false identity. Passing is also referred to as the successful acquisition of cisgender aesthetics so as to be integrated and accepted in society.

**Realness:** A standard used to judge any given performance (or representation) within an established category (gender). It is the ability to compel belief, produce a neutralised effect, and embody norms.

**Sex:** Either assigned male or female based on the basic reproduction functions. This is based on the sexual secondary characteristics (genitals etc) at birth.

**Sexual orientation:** A person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which they are attracted to. Sexual orientation is often confused with sex, gender, and sexuality. The differences in these definitions are to be emphasised in order to create a greater social awareness around LGBPA+ issues.

**Trans panic:** A legal defence that legitimises and excuses violent and lethal behaviour against transgender women in which the defendant claims they acted out of anger or temporary insanity because they did not know the victim was transgender.

**Trans:** The term used to describe individuals whose gender identity and sex assigned at birth are dissimilar and incongruent. Trans, often abbreviated, will refer to transgender women. Transgender, although falling under the umbrella terms trans\*, should not be conflated with other gender identities that deviate from the binary. Trans\* as a term is used as an all-inclusive term to refer to genderfluidity, gender non-conforming, transvestites, transsexuals, and asexual individuals

**Transmisogyny:** The term used to describe the particular hate, or disdain for transgender women in society. It is the interaction of misogyny and transphobia. It is the experience of discrimination based on sex and gender that cisgender women and trans men do not experience.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

**The passages to: *On passing...***

**A reader's guide to navigating this thesis and the social complexities of being coloured,  
transgender and a woman.**

This thesis centres the narratives of transgender women of colour in Cape Town, South Africa and aims to demonstrate that, although passing is unattainable and does not always equate to a social standard for acceptance, integration, and access, it still exists as a rite of passage to womanhood, that creates tension between wanting to belong to womanhood and advocating for a differentiated experience. Passing is unattainable because of unequal access to psycho-medical resources and treatment, it comes with undefinable standards that fluctuate and adds internal and external pressure on transgender women and the community. Thomas Billard refers to passing as the “attainment of cisgender aesthetics” (13). Transgender women who attain this aesthetic are viewed as cisgender. Therefore, because the term passing is problematic, there is a shift to using the term “cis-assumed”. Transgender women are not trying to pass as something other than themselves. This paper will make use of the word passing to ground it in existing research and pave the way for the use of cis-assumed in future research. This thesis will also demonstrate that passing depends on socio-economic independence and/or aid, in combination with access to scarce health and legal services. The experiences of and implications for transgender women who do not pass are explored based on the examination of their lived experiences throughout their transition. Passing requires a merging of conforming and non-conforming to gender norms in society in order to successfully (re)present in society. This requirement allows transgender women to navigate and choose their requirements in order to alleviate social, medical, economic and psychological stressors; this will be discussed throughout the thesis.

Understanding the way transgender women (re)present<sup>1</sup> and identify throughout their becoming contributes to how they as women, experience life, health, and legal services. Currently the transgender women whose representation is closely aligned with their cisgender counterpart through passing is better able to access these services and opportunities, but not without difficulty. Passing as cisgender allows transgender women to integrate into society, face less discrimination and ultimately survive in a society that is often hostile to women, especially black trans women.

To journey through this research paper on understanding passing for transgender women, I have, in this introductory chapter, sketched out a peculiar hybrid research methodology that

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<sup>1</sup> The use of (re)present allows us to focus on the representation of transgender women attained in contrast to their current presentation in society. Contrasting the two allows us to focus on the double standards assigned to them based on the social requirements set forth for men and women and what exists in reality.

combines academic research with autobiographical narrative to better delve into the ways in which passing is understood in Western and specifically (South) African perspectives. The autobiographical narrative is introduced and indicated by the use of an indented sentence that starts with a double asterisk (\*\*).

\*\* It was the day I said goodbye to one of my best friends, Whitney,<sup>2</sup> who was about to move abroad. I went for coffee that morning and asked my date to drop me at this little bar called Trenchtown in Observatory, Cape Town after.

That day I wore a V-neck white t-shirt, jeans and my hair straightened. I thought I looked good and looked pretty passable that day. Whitney, another friend, and I were sitting outside at one of the tables and having a drink, casually chatting to one another, and rehashing the good times.

A white guy with blue dreadlocks, clothed in three quarter shorts, slippers with socks and oversized t-shirt entered the bar together with his coloured friend. They moved through the bar and caught our attention. The guy looked at me as he entered. What he saw was the figure of a beautiful woman and, without questioning it, said hello. But as soon as took his seat and turned to look at me, he remarked:

“Oh! I thought you were a woman.”

Without hesitation, this guy was brave enough to call me out for being transgender, invalidating my gender presentation and my womanhood. I was not going to challenge him; he was a reminder of the social bigotry that is pervasive. He could not, like so many other men who murder transgender women, process my representation, gender identity, or his attraction to it. He seemed surprised that I was beautiful for a trans woman<sup>3</sup>. With his comment, he thought he was correcting himself; he thought that I was just some feminine-looking gay guy who was out. But I was not.

I *am* a woman.

I do not need to have a vagina to be a woman.

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<sup>2</sup> Whitney, referred to in Chapter 3: “Women writing women” is one of my best friends and started my transition with me. She is tall, slender, and coloured like me. She now lives with her husband abroad and still plays an important role in my life.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to Chapter 1: “The Que(e)ry” for a cross reference and explanation of how underhanded a compliment is when a specific condition is attached to it. This marker allows us to explore the ways in which individuals of difference are objectified and later persecuted for their (racial or gender) identity and representation.

I do not need to look like a woman to be a woman.

We sat there, gobsmacked and rattled. I looked over at Whitney and could not believe how audacious this man was. Men often approach women in the worst ways, but his words signalled that my representation was only deemed acceptable if I looked cisgender in some way. Not only was this outing me as transgender to the customers, but he was also publicly ridiculing me and my gender identity. In his eyes, I was only beautiful if I was cisgender. But because I was transgender, he made it his duty to correct it. People who perpetuate anti-transgender attitudes in society, and they make life difficult and dangerous for people who are transgender because of their lack of understanding, empathy and covert or overt hostility.

\*\* I gave him a look that demonstrated my disgust at his insolence. I turned away and we continued our celebrations unfazed, but he kept staring at me from his seat. So Caucasian, so audacious and so caustic!

This reading guide will aim to tie together the ways in which the lived experiences of trans women are understood and narrated through memory, existing research, and the personal accounts of transgender women of colour in Cape Town, South Africa. This guide will also aim to connect the personal and cultural realities that exist and observe the “macro in the micro of personal narratives” (Holeman Jones 54). The introduction to this chapter also features a personal account that aims to pre-empt the insertion of authorial memory into the fabric of this explorative academic research study on passing.

## **1.1 THE QUE(E)RY**

This first chapter explores passing relation to existing academic research, and how passing is viewed as a mode of impersonation and a journey to self-representation. In this chapter I will explore how passing allows transgender women to be invalidated, delegitimised, and discriminated against because of the social misconception that they are not who they say they are. Passing, in this paper, viewed as a contentious and controversial passage to womanhood, but also detrimental to transgender women and their community. For transgender women to pass successfully they should choose their own standards and society should be welcoming of it and not just tolerant.



This chapter also examines how transgender women are framed as impersonators, gender deviants and responsible for the violence against them. The current societal definition of passing is given based on the autobiographical work of Janet Mock who notes that passing is often defined by society as duplicitous and deceivers whose ‘true’ identity is not what they (re)present (2017). This definition is often distributed by news and social media, solidifying stereotypes and ill-informed means of becoming that ultimately disenfranchise transgender women. Transgender women are focused on more in the media because of the sensational and commodifiable nature of women. Anneliese Singh and Vel McKleroy note that there is no existing research that speak to the “resilience process transgender people of colour who have experienced trauma” undertake (34). In this thesis we advocate for and add to this process of documenting resilience through successful self-representation, overcoming social challenges and discrimination by redefining our own narratives.

Passing in the South African (and Western) context creates unfair social standards of acceptance based on representation and access. The “access to biomedical care and body-altering products also depends to a great extent on financial resources” (Thamar Klein 18). Passing as a social standard for transgender women creates unequal distribution of resources and social integration. The social standards that are set forth are those set for white cisgender women by the dominant society.<sup>4</sup> Often this experience of hegemonic beauty is very white, very monied and very privileged when compared to transgender women of colour in South Africa.

In this chapter, I argue that to successfully self-realise, transgender women need to merge the standards of society with the reality of their (re)presentation in order to be comfortable. In an ideal world and my experience, “beauty is a social experience, subjective and interactive” (Mock 60). This key premise allows transgender women to navigate a compromise between conforming or not conforming to gender norms to successfully represent as a woman. This compromise allows existing procedures and treatments to be accessed to the extent that the transgender woman decides. Transgender women should decide their own standards and the end of their transition.

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<sup>4</sup> Representation standards for black women were essentially non-existent until the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The beauty and fashion industry has a history of excluding products, clothing and industry representation for black women. Therefore, the focus of these industries set its standards according to the male preferences for white women. Today, black women are advocating for themselves and setting their own standards with a big focus on natural and individual beauty; however, some brands still advocate for skin whitening, straight hair and slim hairless bodies which are ideals and representation standards associated with white women.

The chapter features personal reflections and experience with passing that slowly introduces the reader to the complexities that exist when presenting as cis. I also write about how this research paper is written and structured as well as how it deviates from the academic form prescribed. The form is deliberate. This movement and merging reiterate the premise of merging or finding a compromise between gender non-conforming and conforming to successfully represent (these narratives). In this way I challenge and disrupt existing understandings of the transgender experience through writing.

By moving between the personal and academic modes of writing I aim to capture the complex multi-perspectival nature of the narratives being told. The entire research paper will situate the stories literature around colourism, transgender theory, and intersectionality. These stories and “testimonies [have] found a particular reverberation in my own life” (Dori Laub 56). The three main textual references in this thesis are the autobiography of Janet Mock, *Surpassing Certainty* (2017), a trans autobiography that details Mock’s experience with her identity, race and passing; Jenni Livingston’s *Paris is Burning* (1990), that documents the ballroom culture of New York in the 1970’s and Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals’ *POSE* (2018), an all-transgender television series that focuses on trans struggles with becoming, HIV and family in the ballroom scene of 1970. The next chapter will focus on the continuation of the research papers central argument related to passing, looking at its history in media and society.

The theorising of transgender lived experience in relation to passing comes with recognising the intersections of oppression transgender women face and how they tackle, oppose, and deconstruct gender norms in society. It also extends to advancing the social, economic, and political integration of transgender women through amended (improved) medical and psychological care. This type of theorising, like this research paper, will focus on intersectionality, queer, and transgender theory. These theories will be used in relation to other key concepts such as gender, womanhood, and colourism (race). In combination with my own lived experience, these theories and key concepts aims to highlight the struggles transgender women in Cape Town face and to particularly locate them in Western and African discursive bodies.

## **1.2 RIGHTING (WRITING) PASSABILITIES**

The second chapter focuses on the ways in which passing originated as a social phenomenon and is now perceived as an informal regulatory standard for transgender representation. The chapter makes use of the documentary *Paris is Burning* and the Emmy award-winning television series *POSE* as a means to dissect the origins of passing in the queer community of New York City in the 1970s. The chapter uses specific titles for subchapters that reference modern queer culture. These cinematic works firmly ground the narrative and representation of transgender women through intersectionality. The contrast in race requirements, in these works, can be seen in the way society in America was constructed in the 1970s after the Jim Crow period that preceded it. The 1970s and 1980s was a period when America and the world moved towards a neo-liberal world order which entrenched historically determined racial, class and gender inequalities.

The particular cinematic and textual mediums used in this chapter will allow us to discuss the ways in which standards of representation are constructed through behavioural and visual cues associated with gender and privilege. In this chapter specific excerpts from *Paris is Burning* and *POSE* are used to illustrate how “realness”<sup>5</sup> is used to measure one’s successful representation or participation in a specific category (or life). In this context, “realness” refers to successfully emulating the standards in a particular category.

Categories in representation make it easier for society to understand the way the world and people are ordered in it. Using categories allows us to see the ways in which passing is closely related to many other social definitions that denote the success of one’s representation when conforming. By subscribing to these categories, passing can be viewed as equivalent to realness. However, consequences of passing are far more severe. As in the documentary, *Paris is Burning*, passing and displaying realness is a social tool that enables transgender women to survive discrimination and social oppression because of their gender representation as women. This authenticity forms a pivotal part in conveying factual and unimagined realness in the ballroom culture. It is often viewed that when transgender women pass, their reason for attempting to acquire (cis)gender aesthetics is to be integrated or have their womanhood recognised. I assert that the womanhood that transgender women experience is not based on

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<sup>5</sup> Refer to Chapter 2: “Righting passabilities” sub-chapter ‘The realness - Touch it, taste it, work it, feel it’ that explains the definition of realness that the documentary *Paris is Burning* and series *POSE* that relates to the social benchmark at which authenticity is measured and revered in ballroom performance.

what women physiologically do with their bodies, namely to reproduce or menstruate, but what we experience in society in relation to our gender roles that we take on and display.

Passing as cisgender allows transgender women to navigate social and professional spaces without opposition. To explore the connotations, functions, and implications of passing, one must deconstruct the word and its meaning as defined by literature, trans women and then society. If you do not pass, if there is no success in your representation (that closely represents cisgender standards), then you have failed and may be affected by the consequences. If you do not pass, you face the political, social, and economic consequences of being a visible body of difference in a society that recognises none. Janet Mock in her work, refers to not successfully passing as being “clockable” or detectable (xiv). This concept, which is the antithesis to passing or being undetected, is one that is utilised in the ballroom culture as a means to make visible the inauthenticity of a participant’s representation/performance. The ballroom culture in the cinematic works utilises this term as a means to explore faults in performances when criteria are not met and society in return uses this to shame and to silence anybody that is different.

Often transgender women are accused of mis-representing their gender identity and deceiving individuals and society if they successfully pass and do not disclose that they are trans. The final section of this chapter will discuss the ways in which transgender women are viewed as unauthentic because they do not conform to gender norms. Gender (re)presentation will therefore never be perfect because there exists no uniform representation of a woman. Transgender women should therefore not conform to these gender norms and continue to challenge dominant social mechanisms that aim to control gender. Transgender women who pass find themselves separated from their trans community because of the negative social consequences associated to disclosing. The subsection in this chapter will also talk about the position of transgender women in womanhood and how they form part of it. The next chapter will focus on my own womanhood and my journey to it.

### **1.3 WOMEN WRITING WOMEN**

For this research study on passing, I recognised the need to evaluate my own journey as a transgender woman. This third chapter focuses on my identity as a light-skinned trans woman and my relationship with my body, society, and race. Women have always played a vital role

in influencing the lives and lived experiences of everyone they encounter. This chapter will particularly focus on transgender womanhood and how it is constructed in relation to influences of and experiences with other women. Through this, we can explore the overlapping and intersecting experiences of women and how they are situated in society. These experiences are made up of particular practices, stories, and definitions, and transgender women have to stake a claim for the inclusion of their own in this matrix of womanhood.

In this chapter I move away from the essentialist and physiological notions of what a woman is and focus on the ways in which woman are socialised into their womanhood. This chapter will focus on memories from my childhood and life at university as well as the start of my transition. The first section in this chapter focuses on the language and the ideologies that stem from their use in my childhood. The section focuses on the ways in which queerness is reproached and suppressed in coloured communities. The section also focuses on the effects of humiliation on young queer individuals and how this humiliation attempts to silence them. The first memory involves an altercation with my aunt and the second involves the exploration of my gender through my childhood. The second section of this chapter uses a memory related to religion and expands how ideology has also sought to reproach, silence, and diminish queerness in children. Often religion views queerness as a deviance to the cause set out for man and woman by God. It is important to note that religion can also be misinterpreted and initiate violence towards queer individuals. Both these sections refer to the ways in which race also influences social understanding of gender and inflects particular lived experiences.

The third section in this chapter focuses on my transition and how I came to name myself. It explains how I took control of my identity, representation, and journey. The purpose of memory and transgender autoethnography is to solidify the narratives and lived experiences of transgender women in literature and history. It is to give recognition to a narrative that disrupts dominant cultures that uses fear and humiliation to correct what it sees as deviant. The focus on autoethnography allows us to give a voice to those forgotten, left behind or worse. This section focuses on how I chose my name, Elana, and how my race and society demanded that I be assigned some(one/thing) I was not. The final section in this chapter focuses on memories from my time at university through my undergraduate degree. It was a time that I spent a year in an all-male residence, started my transition, and met some of my friends. Here we can see the position of coloured transgender women in society today. Finally, it focuses on the ways in which my transition has privileged me in addition to my education, access to resources,

services, and financial aid. This chapter focuses on my journey to becoming a woman and also my troubling journey with passing, my body, race, and society.

#### **1.4 “WOMEN OF THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE: ‘IN THE SHOES OF ANOTHER’”**

This research chapter focuses on a qualitative study conducted on the lives of transgender women of colour by way of interviews to demonstrate the ways in which passing aids or disadvantages them or their community and to elicit an understanding of the requirements for passing in Cape Town. The purpose of the inquiry to passing in the Cape Town context is not only to prove that passing comes at personal and communal cost, that is unattainable and would be a move away from (gender) non-conformity to conformity, but to reflect on the lived realities experienced and the access gained by transgender women. There is also particular emphasis placed on the ways in which race/colourism has impacted transgender women of colour in Cape Town and their social and material access to services. All participants, including myself, are classified as coloured in terms of apartheid racial categories. This selection is deliberate as the demographic and their experiences resonate with me and also foregrounds an under-researched group and their narratives. While I do so, I am aware of the contested nature of this racial category and try to avoid sweeping, essentialising notions of the category “coloured”. However, there are lived realities in a post-apartheid society in which racial thinking persists.

The interview questions in the qualitative study will focus on medical, legal and psychological access, the trans woman’s experience with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003 and the struggle to change your name. The questions also focus on how race affects passing and if passing creates any tensions in the community. With the use of the narrative approach “The evidence is in the stories and the answers to these questions” (Donald Polkinghorne 138). To prove the link between social recognition and discrimination, the interviewed participants will also be shedding light on the requirements for passing and its effects on their lives.

For the ethical purposes of this research, Adams et al, notes that “language and the framing of research should be non-stigmatizing and the research should be disseminated back to the community” (168). This dissemination back to the community is in line with transgender theory which allows for the increased liberation of transgender individuals in public and political

spaces. Adam et al, continues to note that, “the diversity of the community should be accurately and sensitively reflected, displaying a nuanced awareness of all the social, medical, and legal issues that the transgender community might experience” (Adams et al. 172). Being transgender, and incorporating my own narrative, I aim to uphold ethically sound and empathetic representation to sensitively portray lives which are vulnerable at the best of times.

For this interview process, five interviewees were selected (all agreeing to have their names included in the study; no pseudonyms are assigned), and they are:

- Avalon Keys, 25-year-old trans woman from Uitenhage, Eastern Cape.
- Vivienne Evans, 26-year-old trans woman from Clanwilliam, Western Cape, who now lives in Brussels, Belgium.
- Don Maisel’s, 24-year-old trans woman from Cape Town, Western Cape.
- Cher Petersen, 26-year-old transwoman from Cape Town Western Cape.
- Romy Johannes, 27-year-old trans woman from Cape Town, Western Cape.

The interview responses to the questions will be analysed using a thematic linking technique that seeks to elaborate on similarities and highlight differences to maintain the specificity and integrity of the narrative provided. Anderson and Kirkpatrick note that, “the challenge for the analyst would be to present enough of the data that the line of argument and interpretation are convincing while situating the findings in appropriate theoretical and research literature” (3). All data are saved in appendices at the end of this research paper and the participants’ responses are thoroughly quoted and analysed. The analysis of the narratives provided will be thematically structured to explore, substantiate and validate the argument emerging from the research conducted. This is done with appropriate theoretical and research literature to ensure that the thesis contributes to an existing theoretical body of literature on the topic. The analysis will suggest the definition and requirements of passing, and its effects, to the extent that “what [is] demonstrate[d], in part, is a serious disconnect between the theory cited and the actual practice.” (Winter 385). The analysis of the responses will also make use of how and what language is used in the participant responses and why. What was the tone and atmosphere present in the interview and how does that affect the study? What are the literary devices used by the participants and what is the significance of that?

## CONCLUSION: PASSING DENOUEMENT

The final chapter will conclude the entire investigation into the effects and influences of passing on the lives of coloured transgender women in Cape Town. The chapter will draw on the main arguments from each chapter before it, providing research-based justifications for the premise of this study. Connecting the themes in each chapter will allow us to better understand, advocate for, and integrate transgender women in society.

*“Being trans means that I have moved towards myself,  
away from the perceptions of society.  
towards a greater understanding of myself,  
my journey and the power I have as a woman of colour”*

Elana Leah Ryklief



## **CHAPTER 1:**

### **THE QUE(E)RY**

**Investigating the existing definitions and effects of passing, being transgender, and coloured.**

*“If a woman was able to fit the narrow,  
nearly unattainable confines of what society demands women look like,  
it was expected that she keeps quiet about her past  
and just pass” (Mock, 2017).*

In this chapter I will introduce the premise of this research paper. Passing, however detrimental to transgender women and their community, is a part of their journey through womanhood. It will explore and elaborate on the various definitions of passing through primary resources, personal and reported accounts. This chapter will introduce explain the structure and style of the research paper will reiterate the various arguments made about passing. This first chapter will also introduce you to core concepts of gender representation, transgender theory, colourism, and intersectionality. Lastly it will aim to position the narratives of coloured transgender women and highlight the importance and specificity of using narratives of such a highly contested group.

### **1.1 More than just *trans*, more than just *passing***

To live a live a life of difference, a life that finds itself (in)visible in many ways, requires courage and often comes at great personal cost. A life where the requirements for who you should be are not determined by you, means you bear the cost of deviating from it. Wearing yourself on the outside places you in a very precarious position.

Transgender, often confused with the medical term transsexual and the psychologically defined transvestism, in this study refers to the social identity that denotes a change in the assigned gender at birth. The prefix, trans, used also as an adjective, describes a move away from the assigned gender at birth towards a self-assigned gender identity. Transgender women are assigned as male at birth and move towards self-identification as female in all aspects of their lives. The move away from medically assigned definitions of gender signals a positive change in the way transgender women identify in society. However, the move away from the psycho-medical approach does not discredit its role in allowing transgender women to realise

themselves, but such a move aims to address the challenges it poses to women who aim to become their self-identified gender.

I will be using the term ‘trans’ to refer to transgender women without referring to the all-inclusive umbrella term trans\*, the asterisk, which encompasses all non-binary, gender non-confirming, transgender (man/woman), transsexual, gender-fluid and transvestite individuals. It is important to make this distinction as I would like my work to highlight the experiences of transgender women. Therefore, I will pay specific attention to women who were assigned male at birth and socially, legally, medically, and/or psychologically now identify as female. My experience with the term has been a varied and challenging one; however, it has helped me find a way to describe myself with language that does not invalidate me. In my work, I would like to “emphasise [the] practise of self-identification and self-naming, as well as the heterogeneity of trans identified (women)” (Jules Futtu 60).

Cis or cisgender, on the other hand, is the term used to describe individuals whose gender identity corresponds with their assigned sex at birth. In our hegemonic society, cisgender individuals seldom have to explore their gender identity and find themselves nor do they experience social discrimination. This often stems from the gender essentialist view that says one’s sex determines one’s gender - a direct and linear way of thinking that is often normalised and advantaged. Talia Bettcher notes that “there are some people who have congruence between identity and body (cissexuals) and others who do not or who did not (transsexuals), but the social world is constructed in such a way that it privileges the former” (386). This congruence contributes to a gender binary set on creating a type of gender puritanism where the gender binary self-edits itself and is parallel to one another, in masculinity versus femininity. The entrenched aesthetics for cisgender individuals find them working in opposition to one another and this aesthetic does not acknowledge that gender exists on a spectrum. Gender from a cis perspective then finds itself never intertwining or exchanging its properties.

Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis notes: “the Gender Movement challenges the assimilation of gender minority groups into dominant culture, which insists upon continuity between anatomy and lived gender” (3). As an advocate for transgender rights and the demystification of the experience, I hope to deconstruct the perceptions of beauty for transgender women while at the same time providing new ways to define trans experiences in relation to others.

Trans(gender)<sup>6</sup> women in society find themselves prey to the societal aesthetics ascribed to cisgender women, forcing them to deny their past to fit into or pass as their counterpart. Billard defines passing as the “attainment of cisgender aesthetics” where transgender women must “appear to a stranger to ‘look cisgender’” (3). Transgender passing in society is dependent on successfully attaining the fundamental expectations of representation assigned to cis women, that erases all traces of their male gender assigned at birth. Among transgender women this successful realisation of cis aesthetics is passing, when your transness becomes invisible, denied, and erased.

“You have to PASS in every way, bitches!

Your hair has to PASS!

Your clothes have to PASS!

Your makeup has to PASS!

Your face has to PASS!

PASSING is your gateway into the mainstream.

If you want access into that world, you had best come immaculate!” Pray-Tell (*POSE*, s1:e5).

The current perception of “‘Passing’ [as] a term based on an assumption that trans people are passing as something that we are not (cis). [...] Examples of people passing in media, whether through race, class, or gender are often portrayed as leading a life of tragic duplicity and as deceivers who will be punished harshly by society when their ‘true’ (read - assigned identity) is uncovered” (Mock 155).

A transgender woman’s self-assigned identity is her true identity. This means that (re)presenting as cis should be the norm or the standard for her representation/identity. Transgender women are often perceived as deceptive based on their right to disclose or withhold their past. The notion that passing is deceptive stems from a lack of understanding that the lived experiences of transgender women can have dire consequences if you do not pass.

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<sup>6</sup> Defined as the realisation of one’s own gender in relation to social and cultural differences between genders rather than biology (sex). The term therefor does not correspond to established ideas to male and female.

When you do not pass, you are visible, persecuted and categorically discriminated against. If passing is successful, these consequences can be evaded.

Harold Garfinkel states: “Passing through the management of social presentation and avoiding certain situations [removed] ‘the possibility of detection and ruin’” (137). It is the right of the transgender woman to disclose their trans identity and to regulate their life and story. Through managing their identity, transgender women can navigate situations where passing prevents them from being detected as trans and shamed or shunned for their gender identity. In their communities, transgender women are more visible than other non-conforming gender identities, which may increase their exposure to victimisation and violence (Geoffrey Jobson et al. 2). Transgender women who pass are often overlooked because of their close proximity to looking cisgender and those who do not pass are more noticeable because of their differences. Other non-conforming gender identities (transmasculine and feminine, gender queer, non-binary, genderfluid or agender) are also more visible because of their difference and face more discrimination because of this. This is a typical response of society to transgender women and their becoming.

Although attaining the aesthetics of passing assists one in gaining access to certain spaces/resources and avoiding detection and discrimination, there remains a fear in transgender women leading to social isolation, anxiety, and paranoia. Mock notes: “No matter how well I could blend in, I still carried that seed of fear about being found out” (11). The constant paranoia and fear deeply affect transgender women and coerces them to be silent about their transness. This silencing of the lived experience and all that they have accomplished in their lives effectively erases this complex and undervalued history of self-discovery. In passing, erasure is a key thematic concept that governs trans identity.

*Surpassing Certainty* (2017) plays into the notion of passing as contentious and provides a lived experience that attests to the complex realities of this concept. The title speaks of the ability to transcend the difficulties of passing and gives us some insight into what those difficulties are. The title comes from a quote by Audre Lorde: The book's title is an allusion to Audre Lorde, who wrote, "And at last you'll know with surpassing certainty that only one thing is more frightening than speaking your truth. And that is not speaking." (Mock, 2017). In her work, Mock speaks to the intricacies of passing and the ranges of transgender womanhood. For Mock, womanhood and passing comes from the women who have come before her and she refers to her passing as a cloak of normality, “as part of her own survival” which she “followed

as a prescription handed down to me from women who have benefited from blending and passing” (xx). Mock’s lived experience speaks to overcoming, having to obsess about, conform to, and partake in the systems of cisgender individuals that seek to remove the individuality of transgender women.

Truly achieving successful self-representation depends on the standards and definitions of beauty you set for yourself, which are often inflected with cisgendered norms, ironically. Billard states that “passing is not simply the question of how one is read but includes an agential power of affirming one’s own reading of self” (7). This means that your gender representation affirms your gender identity and validates it to the standards that cis people go by but also resists elements of these norms.

The demystification of passing as a privilege could in turn be used to create access, understanding and space for transgender women who do not pass. This study illustrates that passing, while a privilege, creates unseen stressors within transgender women and the transgender community. Bochner and Ellis notes in her work that “such groups should have the same access to services even if their stories do not fit a typical trans-narrative” (2). The external stress creates a social, economic, and political divide between transgender women based on the access that this privilege provides womanhood where some are seen as more favourable than others. Passing as cisgender therefore give you access to womanhood. Transgender women should have the same access to womanhood, its experiences, trauma, and ideologies. Thus, it should also be acknowledged that there is tension between wanting to belong to a broad and inclusive definition of womanhood, but at the same time wanting to define trans womanhood within that domain.

Trans womanhood/sisterhood is a complex place to navigate based on the social and physiological requirements to join the collective. Transgender womanhood becomes a micro-reflection of the larger social tensions among cis and trans women that aim to separate them. Among trans women the stakes are higher, and the competition is tougher than it is for cisgender women. Therefore, I position trans womanhood as a phenomenon transgender woman experience and not physiologically do with their bodies. This does not separate transgender women from womanhood but incorporates and informs it. According to Web, “[w]e cannot hope to achieve effective gender equality if we do not exhaust the possibilities of who we may be talking about” (2014:5). Trans womanhood should be used as a tool to establish lasting relationships in the transgender community.

The new meaning of transgender womanhood should not centre on the domesticated or sexually prolific narratives that society creates, it should be one that they define for themselves with new qualities. We can see that this shift signals a move away from the social expectations for a woman to the individual expectations for a woman. It is important that we shift to new ideals, methodologies, and social conventions to acknowledge and empower every woman in society. For transgender women, their narratives of employment and journeying to womanhood often involves sexual harassment, exploitation, and violence.

Because the experience of becoming differs from cis women, transgender women possess an individualistic journey to womanhood through their transition. During this journey, transgender women decide for themselves when they have finished or successfully transitioned. The experiences of trans and cis womanhood has a historical knowledge or state of awareness that they are being discriminated against based on their gender. There are many social and political experiences of oppression that show similarities between trans and cis women that would justify a uniformed womanhood that does not exclude anyone based on their gender or sexual orientation. Transgender women often do not experience the same physiological experiences of being a (cis) woman. This has been an argument used by radical feminist, religious extremist, and gender essentialist who base womanhood on having a vagina, menstruating, reproduction and giving birth.

However, not all women are able to undertake those biological functions based on other biological limitations. Not all women menstruate, not all women reproduce or give birth naturally and NOT ALL WOMEN HAVE VAGINAS! Susan Stryker acknowledges that some ideas of womanhood “seek to contain and colonise the radical threat [or change in definition] posed by a particular transgender strategy of resistance to the coerciveness of gender: [physical] alteration of the genitals” (244). The idea that not all women have vaginas is not radical and it is not a threat to womanhood. Through the recognition of shared oppression under the patriarchy, all women are able to situate themselves alongside each other on a spectrum. The notion that womanhood is a physical experience is ultimately exclusionary based on reductive physiological and social requirements set forth. Often transgender narratives and bodies are centred around ‘the cut’ or any type of surgery they have, and this limits their inclusion into womanhood because of the gatekeeping Stryker speaks of.

To pass, would be to not fear any confrontation for being a transgender woman, because they (society) do not know that you are trans and would be assumed cis and included in womanhood.

When you pass as cisgender, you are included in womanhood. For Mock, to pass, was to have her “womanhood unchecked and challenged in most spaces I enter” (xix). This for transgender women is quite specific in the communities they form and for successful integration to occur, no opposition should exist. Cis women and society therefore require more justification from transgender woman in order to be validated and incorporated into the community. The more representation there is in society and the media, cis women and society will not require any justification from transgender women and this will give them and their community more confidence and access.

Passing finds itself being reproduced through conforming to gender norms that none of us have a choice in changing on a large scale. Judith Butler notes that these norms force us to negotiate between compulsory performances that none of us choose. However, the compulsory nature makes these norms largely ineffective and unattainable, thus there is a repeated effort to reinstate and restore them (257). These circumstances then determine your privilege and the degree of discrimination you may experience based on how successfully you pass as cis or perform these categories of gender. Amanda Swarr notes that “gender-liminal South Africans have both had notable race and class degrees of public visibility and acceptance and faced significant discrimination in various time periods” (12). Increased visibility for transgender women means that there is an increase in the discrimination and violence they experience in parts or throughout their lives. Passing then positions itself as a form of gender-affirming representation that is in fact undefinable in reality, because the representation of female aesthetics is not uniform in society. Passing is when your gender representation moves from a social state of non-conforming to a state of conforming in order to be affirmed.

The effect of passing is not only a social one, but it is also legally and politically invasive which act to enforce the requirements of passing. The management of transgender identities through long, expensive, and inaccessible medical and psychological requirements becomes detrimental and economically unattainable. Even though the South African Constitution is a forerunner in the human rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals, there are still invasive underlying principles that become political in regulating a specific South African identity that is within the binary. For Katrina Roen, “cultural identity precedes gender/sexual identity in political importance, but these two are intrinsically linked: one does not make sense without the other” (257). Therefore, the cultural/social definition for what it means to be a South African is linked to the gender binary and everything that deviates from the latter is regulated in a particular way to maintain a uniform political identity. Like the participants in Roen’s study, there “is a



concern about the general westernization and subsequent degradation of (fa'afafine) identities" (258). The influence of Western ideologies of gender and sexuality come at great personal and social cost to transgender women who are constantly redefining themselves in response to these ideologies. As Bettcher maintains, "The medical regulation of trans(sexuality), [in this account] is one of the main ways that society tries to erase transgender people" (384). A consequence of this influence is the reduction and degradation of social identities to not only separate but shame them.

Currently the requirements for transgender women in Cape Town are unknown and subject to influence based on the access they acquire. The Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003 (the Act), bases its requirements on Western principles of medicine and psychology, which creates socio-economic barriers. The access to hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to medically transition and meet the requirements is difficult and costly. Not everyone is able to access these healthcare services – privately it is too expensive and publicly it is too time-consuming. With the psychological services in South Africa being too expensive, often transgender women are not able to acquire referrals to public hospitals for HRT. Because South African social regulations for transgender individuals are still based on Western principles and not a localised experience of the lived gender, the access to legal changes becomes even more inaccessible.

The Cape Town Transsexual/Transgender Support Group submitted a presentation on proposed written amendments to Parliament on the Act that premises: "There are many different ways in which a person can transition and we do not all have the same end goals in mind" (2003). Because there is no single way to transition, transgender women can find themselves at various stages of their transition, while the legal requirements set by government are based on outdated medical standards with set goals. This excludes a large portion of transgender individuals who do not want to undergo medical intervention (invasion) but still want to transition socially and go by their preferred pronouns. The current requirements – one being a letter from a psychologist confirming gender identity (disorder?) and two medical reports, one by a primary doctor and a second doctor confirming secondary sex characteristics – do not allow for the social identification of one's identity legally. Being transgender is not a disorder but rather a passage to and realisation of one's own gender identity.

Being transgender is no longer recognised as a disorder by the World Health Organisation (WHO), so the question is will access for transgender women now legally, socially, politically,

and economically increase due to the rectifications made by this global organisation? Will countries amend their constitutions and work towards a greater social understanding of transgender individuals?

## 1.2 My dreams for trans women of colour

\*\* If I had access to women who looked, spoke, and thought like me when I was younger, my life would be different.

I dreamed that it would be different, in ways that then seemed unimaginable to me. Society might have been a better place, the death toll and political persecution of transgender women of colour in the world would possibly be less. There could have, perhaps, been better and easier ways for me to self-realise and self-identify. I have always wanted my life to be different. Living in a world that did not fully understand who I was meant to be, I always imagined myself to be different.

But I had to fit in,  
 Into this world,  
 This time,  
 With this body,  
 Living this life.

Wanting to be different and in a different world is not a bad thing – I found it to be my starting point. So, I decided to change who I was, for Vaid-Menon says, “That is the gift we as queer and trans people (women) have – we have the ability to take a step back, look at the lives we are living, and decide that that is who we should not be” (YouTube: NOWTHIS 2018). I did not know who I was for a long time. And now was the time for me to discover me.

I am transgender.

A woman with a different story of be(com)ing.

For me, “if a trans woman who knows herself and operates in the world as a woman is seen, perceived, treated, and viewed as a woman, isn’t she just being herself? She isn’t *passing*, she is merely *being*” (Mock 155).

I had never really seen anyone who looked like me. I had never seen positive roles of transgender women in society. Women who had made it on their own, into spaces I could never see myself. Women with a profession that went beyond the socially coerced employment of the dim lights of a shady lounge, the unpredictability of an unknown street corner, or the screen of a young man ‘exploring’ his sexuality.

I never saw the power of transgender women. The truth is, they are strong women who grew up and came into their own, giving light to meaningful representations for young transgender women. These women had, in some instances, only ever seen themselves represented as hypersexualised citizens of this world in the media. I saw myself in these women, every one of them and came to know who I really was by their example.

I did not know that I would become the woman I am today, with the opportunity to tell not only my story, but the stories of those who came before me and who live alongside me, and for those who will come after me. Telling your story can be a powerful act and a declaration to the world about who you are and what you contribute to it. When you tell your story, it is the gift of knowledge that has not yet been transcribed into the history books of our time. (Note that the histories of transgender individuals have almost always been narrated by those who are not transgender until very recently.) Engaging in the narratives of and connections in your community can increase and contribute to your own “personal resource of resilience” (Annelise Singh 68). Telling your story is the ability to share yourself without expecting the world to praise you for your struggles or chastise you for acknowledging your strengths.

I know that there is power in a trans woman telling her story, and I know that these retellings are grounded in the past and provide a perspective to look to the future. We know that knowledge creation is never entirely “neutral and objective” but is located in power relations and is to be “understood as a constant epistemological-political undoing and redoing” (Futty 59). The stories of other trans women all helped me to become the woman I am today, learning about myself through their stories and unlearning the gendered ways of the world that seemed to govern all that I am.

I have the opportunity to understand myself - as a coloured trans woman born and raised on the Cape Flats of post-apartheid South Africa, a place with a rich cultural and social heritage

where being coloured means that I have always known about my difference and was never allowed to forget it.

Race in the South African context is something you simply cannot ignore. During colonialism and apartheid, the mixing of populations in the Cape region brought about the transferal of specific traits creating a diverse population grouped called ‘coloured’ that was used to classify a person as neither white nor black. Coloured populations were categorically described in Act 30 of 1950 as non-white and ‘non-native’ to the country. This act was called The Population Registration Act. During this time, coloured populations were placed in the middle of the race binary that was constructed in South Africa (black and white), forming a mixture of identities that now seems to be a heterogenous identity derived from the mixing of homogenous groups.

Helene Strauss notes that “coloured may be insufficient as a referent for the myriad and complexly articulated identities that were both impacted by, and resistant to, its legislative and discursive reach and that ‘coloured’ invites both identification and dis-identification” (8). From this argument one can garner there is no fixed idea or way to identify as coloured, as the identity itself is constantly evolving and re-establishing itself based on historical, socio-economic, political, and cultural influences. Coloured identities constantly evolve like transgender identities in this way finds itself a part of woman discourses and yet it is often positioned as separate from it because of the continuous development of the self-identified gender.

Louw writes about his experience and quotes Frantz Fanon: “[T]he colonised is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother (coloniser’s) cultural standards.” Taking on certain cultural and social values of the dominant society in order to gain access and approval is the same way passing functions in society and creates privilege for a few. Louw continues: “[T]his promise of privilege has had a profound effect, not just on the psyche of coloured people, but society at large. While aspirations of whiteness in the community have developed into a culture of body manipulation” (*Daily Maverick*, 2018). The proximity to whiteness, that would lead to social access and acceptability, would bring about colourism and how it affects people of colour.

Colourism in this way focuses on your proximity to whiteness based on the skin colour you have; this is based on a more nuanced approach to assigning privilege based on race. The lighter the skin, the greater privilege assigned. Colourism is also the internalised socially embedded experiences of prejudice based on someone’s race. Racial attitudes are then experienced by people of colour at various degrees of severity based on their skin colour.

Being a light-skinned coloured transgender woman on the Cape Flats forces me to recognise the ways in which my race has privileged me. The effect of this means that I am a racialised body as much as I am a hypersexualised gendered body, me being light skinned has given me a privilege that is akin to whiteness. My experience with my education and job experience echoed Mock's experience when she thought pointing out the exceptions would make a difference: "My mixed black girl self – who was privileged by the hierarchy of the skin-color system – thought I was contributing something substantial by pointing out the exception to the rule" (168).

Because whiteness is still privileged in society, being light skinned has given me access to historically racialised spaces to tell the narratives of transgender women of colour in Cape Town. Cape coloured "identity is rooted in particular political and historical visibilities and regulations" (Ward et al. 457). South Africa's particular racial history is also a political one. Not only does race come with a specific political reality in South Africa, gender and sexuality follow the same reality that displays remnants of intense regulation of the self and spaces. This ultimately affects the access and visibility of certain races, gender, and sexual identities. I now have the opportunity to explore my narrative alongside women who look, speak, and think like me because this reality is changing. I never knew that I had to take our narratives and tell them to the world, but Mock reminds me of my duty: "For a black (trans) woman to reach such heights was rare, and when we make it into those spaces, we are most often charged with leading the way for inclusive and diverse coverage" (201).

*To contribute to the stories about trans women, for trans women by trans women.*

I wanted to uplift the transgender narrative that has already been stigmatised to the point of political persecution by alt-right groups who focus on gender essentialism as their main justification for gender puritanism. Dominant society often forgets that "[g]ender and gender identity, sex and sexuality, are spheres of self-discovery that overlap and relate but are not one and the same" (Mock 50). Mock's claim emphasises the notion that gender, sex and sexuality function outside of the deterministic and binary heteronormative system. It is important to differentiate between these concepts, even though they overlap, to ensure that the lived experiences of transgender women are recognised and validated. Knowing these differences would ensure that we do justice to the understanding of transgender lives.

With narratives of transgender women of colour in America foregrounded in both the news media and television industry, the narratives that are given are conflicting. Transgender women

successfully pass in society and publicly acquire safety through their fame. Other transgender women experience violent (and often fatal) discrimination in society, with new media removing the self-identified gender identity and replacing it with the assigned name and sex or simply referring to them as “trans woman”. News coverage often promotes a social attitude of how transgender women are to be perceived and reacted to. I could relate to Mock’s experience seeing these new stories of my slain sisters:

“I had internalized messages that told me I would never measure up, I would always be an imitation, I would never be considered real or valuable. Therefore, I should expect to be fetishized, ridiculed, rejected, or attacked. The threat of violence always loomed. My ultimate fear, a fate all too familiar for trans women of colour globally, was becoming another statistic, another name spoken at a vigil on Transgender Day of Remembrance. I did not want to be another trans girl killed because some man could not process his attraction to my body and therefore had (chosen) to eliminate it” (Mock 64).

Removing the identity of transgender women creates a social attitude that dismisses the cause and severity of death and who did it. Transgender women are often killed by men who utilise: ‘trans panic’ defences – the name given to the argument that a transgender person’s murderer acted in the heat of passion at discovering their presumed-cisgender sexual partner was actually transgender and should therefore not be held responsible for their crime” (Billard 5).

\*\* I can change the way knowledge is centred around men and maleness. To emphasise the lived experience of women who look like me and explore ways of knowing and becoming that are our own.

### **1.3 ‘mixed’ writing**

The concept of passing stems from the need to make ‘things’ pass as something close to the original idea that inspired it. This conceptualisation comes from the need to focus on the representation of works presented either as a living body or as text. The purpose of this study is to deviate from the conventional scholarly representation that counters/inverts passing’s function as a move from gender non-conformity to conformity. Taking the form of an academic thesis that is hybrid and experimental, shaping itself in places with the reflection of current works and my own story, “guided by the overall intention to engage in transdisciplinary and

transversal dialogue, to challenge and interrupt norms of academic theorising” (Futty, 2010:60). The interruption of academic norms allows for the continuous exploration of a particular dialogue with pieces of work that foreground passing.

I felt the way Janet Mock did, “unbeknownst to me, I was suddenly successful at passing. I was blending in... With my gender non-conformity seemingly fading away” (38). Even though passing demands we prescribe to the necessary requirements set for academic pieces in order for it to be approved, comprehensive and palatable, the blended form of this academic work will demonstrate that the non-conformity of transgender individuals’ lives should also be recognised, valued and accepted in society and in text. This rings true in the argument of Lake Elrod’s presented at the Politics of Passing Conference, “By championing mixture over binary dichotomy, visibility over complicity, and complex narratives over recognizable, ‘plausible histories,’” (2015). Alison Stone also initiated an academic debate about the political viability of trans passing that still lingers in the generation of trans writers and activists that took up Stone’s challenge to write themselves into discourse (2).

The shifts between the academic and personal is used as a method to counter passing as a move to conformity. By not separating and having a strict distinction between the third- and first-person narrative, breaking with the conventional form assigned to academic pieces allows for the creative exploration and explanation of the transgender lived experience through my own story. The first-person narrative heralds and concludes its interjection into the academic theorising of passing as an unattainable social construct, with the indentation of the sentence that, begins with two asterisks (\*\*).

The purpose of deviating from the academic form, is to echo the complexity and creativity of the transgender lived experience when navigating the requirements of passing. The incorporation and merging of personal and academic pieces allow for the formulation of a hybrid piece that switches between the two. To continue this deviation, “the choices made about what type of material to include here were not based on traditional disciplinary prescriptions or academic expectations regarding sources or methodology (and form)” (Swarr 27). This thesis is a “response to the subject of the material” and “its politicised subject” (Swarr 27). The response of this paper is to maintain that gender non-conformity in transgender women is to be valued and acknowledged, that conforming to conventions often remove the complexity of works created on social concepts and centring narratives of marginalised groups remain imperative to the advancement of society.

The unconventional form of this paper makes use of footnotes as a site for personal commentary, definitions, and proposed use for the terms in this paper. The footnote then becomes an experimental site, not only for providing information, by crafting and weaving it into the academic form as a place for personal opinion. Moving away from conventions always comes at a risk. This hybrid form of writing – mixing the personal and the academic forms – allows for a focus on the sometimes intermediate or hybrid nature of being coloured or transgender in certain contexts. Coloured individuals are often positioned between black and white, and transgender individuals are often positioned between genders. This hybrid form echoes the mixing of conforming and non-conforming representation standards for transgender women, often used as a means for successful representation.

The addition of unconventional methods of writing functions alongside the form of transgender women in society: there is no uniformity in the representation of women and the more creative you are with the creation of yourself, the better.

Isn't that what I am trying to do?

Write my way (story) into the world of acceptability.

\*\* I had to look at the forms of privilege I was occupying in order to tell the narratives of transgender women in Cape Town.

The privileges of being light skinned, with access to higher education, and the means to work in a democratic South Africa have provided me with the opportunity to tell the stories of other transgender women, and their lived experience as people of colour. Having the opportunity to tell someone else's story and to contribute to the lived experiences of other women who are transgender is an honour. I am privileged enough to not only be seen as racially acceptable, but this in conjunction with my access to education and the early access to HRT has afforded me a significant amount of privilege to establish myself and my identity as a transgender woman. I find myself occupying a space being sanctioned beautiful and socially attractive, often hearing the remarks:

“You wouldn't say, you're beautiful *for a trans girl!*”

“What surgeries have you had?”



“Do you have a vagina? Or is yours bigger than mine?”

Did they (men) expect me to keep quiet about being transgender? Was disclosing that I am trans something I should not have done? Should I have kept it to myself and let the conversation continue without this critical piece of information? Was keeping quiet about my history keeping me safe and out of harm’s way? As Jules Futtu states: “The silence and invisibility about one’s history that many trans people legitimately seek as the safe haven after years of hypervisibility, doesn’t feel like a safe haven to me at all. I had to silence too much to not know the weight, the invisible burden and pain of shame and the danger of silenced stories” (58).

I know that my story was something worth noting. I also know that telling someone I am transgender means being the recipient of some unwarranted commentary from people. But I feel I must tell them, for my own safety. Because being transgender should not come with an interrogation of who you are or the requirement to keep quiet about certain parts of yourself to be socially accepted and safe. Mock adds: “When *beautiful* was used to describe me, it was often qualified through filters of gender and race. If they knew I was trans they would often say: ‘*Oh, my God! You look like a real girl*’.<sup>7</sup> If they did not know I was trans, it would often be racialised: ‘*You are pretty for a black girl*’” (60).

With this backhanded compliment giving credit to my aesthetic beauty, I find it reductive in many ways. I am only beautiful once I have passed the social prescriptions for racial and gendered beauty that I possess as a coloured woman. It is reductive in that it focuses primarily on the physical aspect of my gender representation. Removing my entire lived experience and the means that I acquired to attain the physical beauty that is so easily complimented and then reinterpreted. Of course, the underlying assumption here is that other transgender women who do not conventionally look like women are not pretty. When I was at Trenchtown, this assumption was not made about me, and the white male? Maybe he did not expect me to be transgender because he was attracted to me. Was the quality of my aesthetic a necessary requirement for me to be identified as a woman? Were these ‘compliments’ made to question the validity of (my) womanhood? What I do know is that telling someone I am trans is not an opportunity for them to remind me of my difference and isolate me because of it. Mock elaborates: “They were all backhanded compliments, acknowledging my beauty while also

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<sup>7</sup> Refer to the personal narrative in the introductory chapter that details my experience with a white guy who thought I looked like a ‘real’ girl.

invalidating my identity as a woman. To this day I am told in subtle and obvious ways that I am not ‘real,’ meaning that I am not, nor will I ever be, a cis woman; therefore, I am fake” (155).

When I came to recognise that the person who I was, was not who I should be, I began to look for people who looked like me. I began to understand who I was. I explored the realities of my life in all its complexities and discovered there was no guidebook for women like me, no manual to live a life of difference in a world that seemed to publish weekly articles on ‘Ten ways to make a guy fall in love with you’ in publications for teenage girls. The nurturing and support given to cisgender individuals is insurmountable. However, with this work I will give my lived experience as a contribution to girls like me.

The formative years of my becoming were hard and filled with bureaucratic hurdles that seemed never-ending. If there are two things I have learnt and which I would like to share, it would be to start early (there are ways for you to do it) and to be patient (because the process does take long). I hope my approach and perspective will help trans women feel more comfortable with themselves sooner, but it is hard when the beauty standards for transgender women are set to an unattainable standard<sup>8</sup>.

\*\* It is even harder when the requirements to be transgender are not set by transgender people, but by cis men who do not understand the lived experience of trans women, only their own experience of it.

#### **1.4 I am not *they* say I am**

\*\* Passing for me was not the end goal I was striving towards. I did not want to successfully acquire someone else’s aesthetic qualities. I wanted my own.

I knew that the discourse surrounding transgender women and passing was something that I had to address. I felt that the language used to describes a “transgender person who does not pass is a monstrosity unsuccessful deceiver,” “men in dresses” and “transgender women who do pass are depicted as tricksters” (Billard 5). This language not only removes the womanhood

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<sup>8</sup> Elektra Abundance says it perfectly, “You think I just woke up one day and POOF, I looked like this? NO! It takes WORK, DRIVE and SACRIFICE to be a woman.” (*POSE*, s1: e5).

and identity of transgender women who do not pass by referring to them as ‘a *monstrously* unsuccessful deceiver.’ (Seriously, monstrously?). It also questions the beauty of the transgender women and tries to relegate us as the ‘other’ – as predatory and disgusting. Transgender women are not out to deceive men, when their main objective is to be accepted as women in society without continued questioning, harassment, invalidation, and misrepresentation. For me Alok Vaid-Manon summed up this experience perfectly in poetry that aims to respond to this continued social antagonism:

“To the two men who yelled, ‘that’s a man in a dress.’

I want to turn around, point back,

SHOUT!

‘That’s an insecure man.’

‘That’s an INSECURE man.’

‘That’s an INSECURE MAN!’” (2018).

I was always told that I was different in some way to everyone. Too effeminate for the boy my mother and father wanted, too masculine to even be considered a woman. Some people said I was gay, and it had me thinking for a while. But these were all other people’s opinions of me and who I was. I was attracted to boys, and I was okay with my body. I had based my sexuality on the sexual attraction I had towards men. I always knew I was the other. Everyone else around me felt so secure in themselves and never had to question their (cis) identity and sexuality. But when you change your gender identity, your sexuality changes again.

I am a (trans) woman                    +                    and I am attracted to men                    =                    Heterosexual

Some simple maths for you.

Using the formula - Gender identity (GI) added to the sexual attraction to (A) would equate to the sexuality of someone (S), in other words  $GI + A = S$ . This I found easy to understand, but for some people it might not be. Would some of them still see me as a man and invalidate my gender identity completely, thereby changing my sexuality?

Somehow, deep down inside of me, I knew, I was never really gay.

I always knew that I was different (which is not the same as being told), and the dream was always to change who I was and to live a life that I only saw in movies. But I was confused, I never really saw myself as a boy, physically or mentally. Growing up meant that I now had to discover myself. Through constant self-exploration I knew that being assigned and described as a man was something that needed to change. I was not going to change my sexual attraction, but I was going to change my gender identity.

Yes, there are milestones in a transgender woman's life that you set for yourself, but if you ask when did you first know that you were different? It is kind of hard to know when exactly. It is more a case of 'I always knew that I was different.' Even though a form of gender correction or policing always existed in my life, with people around me reinforcing an identity that was not congruent with who I was, I always got mistaken for a girl at a very young age. I did not feel like I was any gender identity, despite the ever-looming gender correction/policing.

Being coloured in Cape Town meant that the gender roles that you assume here, in your community, are fixed at birth and never change, but this is the case regardless of race. My father was always hypermasculine – assuming the role of breadwinner and lawmaker of the house – and my mother was always independent, soft, and calm. It was expected that I take on the hypermasculine role that is necessary to survive on the Cape Flats, a region of Cape Town that was specifically designed for coloured minorities during apartheid. My being different, as they saw it, would make me a target for discrimination. Maybe they wanted to protect me from this with their constant surveillance. But I never really felt any type of gender when I was growing up. I always imagined and positioned myself as a woman growing up. Identifying as transgender was easy for me.

On the Cape flats of Cape Town, an important of culture and the demonstration of that culture is the *Kaapse Klopse*. It is a vibrant celebration of colour with colour, a combination of glittering sequins and satin military-style garments in all the colours of the rainbow. Tassels and badges display the status of ranking members of the troop. With the glitter, face paint, sequined garments, and the excitement, much of my exposure to queerness/transness was not on the television and in mainstream media as for most people. In the Cape coloured culture, if you were an effeminate boy, possessing behavioural traits and representation similarities to women, you would be deemed a *moffie*. But I never felt like a moffie, even though I immediately knew the word was derogatory and used to shame, humiliate, shun, and attempt to correct my gender identity. This colloquial term could be associated with the well-known

term ‘faggot’ or the academic crossdresser/transvestite – who still identify as male. However, I knew this term was not applicable to me; I was not a man. I was not playing dress-up or trying to emulate a gender I was not.

I am a woman. A woman of my own making. Janet Mock accurately echoes my ethos for my transition, “My pass(age/ing) was an evolution from me to closer-to-me-ness. It is a journey to self-revelation [...] I sought something grander than the changing of genitalia. I was seeking reconciliation with myself” (227).

The premise for my transition and representation was not to be recognised as a cis woman, but as a woman. My womanhood was my own. How I came into my own womanhood was for me to decide. I just wanted to be comfortable and safe within myself. I wanted my representation to be an enhancement of my inner beauty and I wanted my journey to be one of positive exploration of myself and my gender identity. I was not concerned with defining myself based on genitalia, but how I saw myself and how I wanted the world to see me.

I wanted to change the notion that I was defined by my genitalia, that my womanhood was only valid if I had a vagina. When conversations centre around transgender people’s genitalia, those conversations “are deeply objectifying” (Cox, 2018). I never related to the description the coloured community had for a journey like mine. I wanted to create a space for conversation that is beyond my body.

Heterosexual was never something I viewed myself as, until I managed to find a safe space in my identity that allowed me to explore the concept. This safe space was me being comfortable with my identity legally (name change and gender mark), medically (HRT and my body), and socially (representation and pronouns). The way I chose the requirements for my womanhood and passing depended on me. I was not following the ideals set forth by society for women, although I had made it through the basic requirements to be recognised. But I had it easy, unlike many other trans women.

When you look at me, sexuality is not the first thing that comes to mind. However, there still seems to be some confusion, as if trans people cannot be gay, lesbian, pansexual, or bisexual. The confusion stems from invalidating the diversity of transgender women in society and I was neither a man nor was I gay. (Maybe at one point I was, but that is a different story.)

\*\* I needed new ways of understanding who I was. Ways that made it clear to me how the intersections of my identity affect my lived experience. Theory that would enable me to better articulate the ways in which systems have influenced the amount of access I have attained.

### **1.5 Passing, putting ‘our’ stories into perspective.**

Attaining cisgender aesthetics in society to pass, functions on the premise that the physical sex and gender representation of transgender person should be congruent to be accepted. However, the standards assigned to cis people should not be the norm for society. Queer theory in this way aids us in dismantling and challenging gender norms associated with being female and trans in society (Butler40). The subjecthood of transgender women and the norms that govern their acceptability have the underlying objective to coerce them into a gender binary system, which is linked to mandatory (assigned) heterosexuality (Butler 1990). This coercion aims to remove all male traits and replaces it with female traits to attain acceptance. To obtain this acceptance transgender women are coerced into their self-assigned gender through medical and psychological interventions. Nevertheless, despite this coerced erasure and how prescriptive these requirements are it is extremely important that this thesis “not only [emphasises that] the recognition of difference matters, but also how differences are presented” (Futty 62).

All too often the narratives of transgender women seem to be centred around the effects our lived experience has on cis people and society. Often these narratives relegate transgender women to medical/psychological discourses with negative themes of deception, the other and monstrosity. Intersectionality is a key theoretical concept that allows us to evaluate the lived experience of transgender women by recognising the intersections of a trans woman’s life.

The intersections of my life – being coloured, a woman, trans and educated – forces me to acknowledge the intersections of passing – having access to medical or psychological services, being able to change my name, gender marker and identification number.

Kimberle Crenshaw, well-known intersectional theorist, recognised this by pointing out the intersections of her race (black) and sex (female), and how they influenced her life (1989). Add to this the intersections of socio-economic status, sexuality, and gender identity. Race in my instance, and that of the women of Cape Town is heavily influenced by cultural definitions of

gender. Crenshaw notes that her work seeks to dismantle the “tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of the experience and analysis” (139). These categories do not function in isolation and have a combined impact on the way a (transgender) individual experiences and understands their life. Patricia Collins and Sirma Bilge explains that the use of intersectionality, as a theory, is to highlight the ways in which various identity factors such as gender, race, nation, and sexuality “interact with one another and are not privileged over and other identity factor” (16). These identity factors contribute effects equally in the lives of transgender women. Therefore, being trans, coloured and a woman all effectively influence the way I live, and one should not outweigh the others or be disregarded in any way.

Intersectionality as a tool allows us to demonstrate the ways in which identity factors influence someone is lived experience, and queer theory, to dismantle the rigid social requirements for these identity factors. It is important to note that these factors do not function in isolation. Transgender theory “recognises the diversity of trans subjectivities” (Sally Hines 49). The use of transgender theory profoundly features in the lives of transgender women of colour’s lives in Cape Town and how they experience it individually within the confines of an academic discourse. With the celebration of transgender identities in society, media, and academia – often for bravery – there should be an accompanying analysis of difference (Hines 52). The contribution of transcribing transgender women’s lived experience contributes to the knowledge production that (should) brings about social change.

Transgender theory strives not only to highlight the complexities of a transgender woman’s life or the centring of her narratives, but the advancement of the social understanding of what it means to be transgender in order to eradicate anti-transgender (transphobic) attitudes in society and cis-systems. Transgender theory changes the ways in which transgender individuals are perceived and spoken in about in literature and society. Katrina Roen states the importance of contextualising gender with cross-cultural references in order to understand the meaning of transgender lives in a specific time and location in order to accurately comprehend the lived experiences of transgender women (258). Roen continues to note that transgender theory offers important critiques for “restrictive ways of understanding gender” (261). Transgender theory in this way makes use of a particular social concept and aims to provide a critical analysis, within context, to promote a better understanding of it. It is with this theory’s specificity of uplifting the transgender narrative, that I explore the concept of passing in relation to my own narrative.

Therefore, we can see the need for non-conformity in literature and gender representation by changing or merging different forms. Through the use of personal narratives, we are able to introduce key experiences that is echoed in chapters hereafter. In the next chapter we will further expand on the use of the cinematic works and how the core theoretical concepts emerge through lived experience.



## **CHAPTER 2:**

### **Righting (writing) passabilities**

**Passing in the Ballroom: Revisiting *Paris is Burning* and the embodiment of ‘realness’  
in Queer culture.**

In this chapter I focus on popular queer cinematic themes that form the foundation of passing and realness as a standard in transgender representation. *Paris is Burning* and *POSE* make use of transgender women and journeys to womanhood and representation by participating in thematic categories that resemble everyday life. I explore the ways in which representation has been disseminated by the media and consumed by transgender women and queer communities. The chapter also focuses on the fact that even though passing is detrimental to transgender women and their community, it is still a passage that is taken to womanhood and successful self-(re)presentation in society.

Recently, the production of an all-transgender cast television series, *POSE*, makes use of intertextualities from *Paris is Burning* as its main source of inspiration. *POSE*, like *Paris is Burning*, is set in New York in 1987 (both in the same year) with a focus on the ballroom culture that brought queer individuals together. Much of the intertextualities that are used in *POSE* stem from the lived experiences of the ballroom culture and transgender women who participated in them in *Paris is Burning*. The similarities between the documentary and television series are in their thematic foci in the ballroom scene of queer individuals, thematic categories of performance, houses or chosen teams (families) and house mothers who assume the role of head of the house. House mothers are known as one of the main parents of the house, who speak to the womanly qualities of motherhood - such as being nurturing and being 'partially' domesticated. Every house gets to choose their own family and admission to the house is determined by the house mother should the prospective 'child' get chosen. Admission is either presented to or applied for.

House mothers also represent the parents queer individuals, who were rejected and abandoned, never had. House mothers take in rejected queer individuals as their chosen children and formulate their own house and family outside the heterosexual white family construction. The term also turns the notion of 'head of the house' upside down – this is usually the 'man of the house' and very much a masculine position. But the house mother takes up being both the traditional male role (leader, in charge, makes decisions) AND female role (nurturer, protector, supporter).

In *POSE*, house mothers are often transgender women of colour who have in some way transitioned: Blanca Evangelista, Elektra Abundance, Lulu and Candy Ferocity. However, in *Paris is Burning* we see that the mothers of the houses are gay men who sometimes are drag queens as well: Willie Ninja and Pepper Labeija. Blanca notes what motherhood in the

ballroom is really about: “I’m a house mother, I provide a support system for my children and housing if you need it” (*POSE*, s1:e1). In this way to have children and provide support does not require a vagina.

Mothering in this way is not something that stems from only giving birth to biological children. In this way, mothering becomes a social performance/demonstration of the womanhood of transgender women who take on these roles. “To be the mother of the house, you have to have the most power. Take a real family—it is the mother that is the hardest worker... The mother gets the most respect” (Willie Ninja, *Paris is Burning*, 1991). PrayTell echoes the significance of a mother in every household, but specifically the ballroom scene, “Every family deserves a mother that is affirming, caring, loyal and inspiring ... She (is someone who) has saved many a soul lost in darkness, simply by shining her light” (*POSE*, s1:e8).

These core intertextualities allow for the construction and deconstruction of particular social concepts that govern queer lives. Although much of the transgender experience is centred in both these cinematic works, there is mention of the intersections of race, economic and social status as well as the deconstruction of gender in queer culture.

With the successful embodiment of a particular gender (female) through passing, the performance of this embodiment often goes against the deconstruction of gender by conforming to gender categories. In *POSE*, we see that the entire first season is focused on the (de/re)-construction of passing and how this feature in the lives of transgender women of colour particularly. The title of *POSE* allows us to explore the concept of gender in relation to presenting oneself as someone else (posing) and not the true self. However, the TV series and documentary film also focus on the vogue dance moves that took inspiration from the poses of models on the cover of Vogue Magazine. *Paris is Burning* therefore lays the foundations for understanding the transgender experience in *POSE* and demonstrating the similarities with transgender lived experiences today.

These two cinematic works have created a storyline for queer individuals to find themselves and shape their own histories according to their lived experience. They also demonstrate the importance of personalised jargon used to describe the lives and lived experiences of trans individuals and reflect the similarities between queer lives in different parts of the world because of systems that exist globally. Both cinematic works centre narratives on transgender

lives around sex work, HIV/Aids, transitioning (HRT and gender (re?)assignment<sup>9</sup> surgery), race and capitalism as well as discrimination. Often it is the access to mainstream information that informs smaller communities and has a trickle-down effect on the narratives of transgender people. Therefore, it is essential that whatever is produced and distributed by trans people is written, edited, and approved by trans people. This production and distribution not only speak to authenticity and access, but also to representation through a trans lens as opposed to a cisgender or heterosexual lens on the other. This plays into the guiding idea at play in *POSE* in that it is written, directed and casts transgender women and queer individuals (*Paris is Burning* does this as well) in order to address the need of writing and righting histories of the queer community.

*POSE* and *Paris is Burning* provides queer individuals with their own cinematographic imprint and resource. These two visual mediums allow us to explore the ways in which passing has infiltrated the lived experience of transgender women by requiring them to adhere to the representation standards of cis women in order to be accepted, which I discuss in the following subsections. We see in these mediums that passing becomes unattainable for some women because of their socio-economic background, their race, and certain biological advantages, as well as the early access to hormones and gender (re?)assignment surgery. These two works simultaneously speak to the deconstruction of gender through gender (re)presentation and the reconstruction of gender conformity through passing.

## 2.1 ‘Learn it, and Learn it well’<sup>10</sup>

The ballroom scene in *Paris is Burning* demonstrates the ways in which passing functions as a requirement to participate in ballroom dancing and as a regulatory standard to judge the success of the participants who compete in ballroom dancing competitions. The ballroom scene is set in New York and is documented from 1986 to 1987 and is described by the participants as a place for “gay men” to gather and have a competition among themselves (this description

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<sup>9</sup> I question the appropriateness and use of reassignment in the context of surgery because even though there is a medical justification for it (appointing a different gender), there is also the justification of allowing gender to be self-assigned. In the same way my doctor refers to HRT as estrogen supplementation.

<sup>10</sup> This heading is from *Paris is Burning* (1991) conveys that whatever artform (representation) you are attempting to master; you should do so with the intention of being the most proficient in it!

excludes transgender participants). The ballroom can also be described as a place where “our fantasy of being a superstar” can be realised and where it is as “close to reality” as queer people will get (Pepper LaBeija, *Paris is Burning*, 1991). The ballroom is then a place to demonstrate and assess your proximity to the particular reality you are trying to embody (this is often whiteness). The demonstration of your proximity occurs in participating in thematic categories: “*fem queen realness, butch queen, first time in drag at a ball.*” These categories are where you display the success of your ability to pass. The ballroom is a place where you can find the notoriety, acceptance, and appreciation that queer people do not receive in society and mainstream media.

The influence of *Paris is Burning* on *POSE* has allowed its writers and producers to provide an accurate representation of what the ballroom culture in New York City was like in the 1980s by creating a “television series that has the scenes’ stars not just appearing, but consulting on and directly influencing everything from storylines to the direction a queen twirls” (Bendix, 2018). Although the documentary is produced by a lesbian cis white woman, Jenni Livingston, it has benefited from the narratives of black gay men and transgender women of colour living on the streets and in the ballrooms of New York. But it should be noted that it is because of her race and being cisgender that she was given the access (assigned privilege) to be able to tell the narratives of individuals she found interesting. For transgender women of colour in America in the 1980s, as depicted in both cinematic works, the same opportunities of education, employment, and creative license were not given to them because of racist and unequal systems. This is also true of the racialised and segregated apartheid South Africa.

For queer individuals, balls<sup>11</sup> are not just seen as a space where you “can do all you intend to do” but it also functions as a space where you can give back to your community (*Paris is Burning*, 1991). Through shared oppression, queer individuals create an inclusive community by choosing their own family (in the form of houses) and then compete together in the balls. In the balls, the categories are broad and very inclusive. Dorian Corey notes that “There’s always something for everyone, that’s why they keep coming” (*Paris is Burning*, 1991). This shift from a place where only gay men can compete to a place of inclusivity through the diversification of categories allows queer individuals to find a sense of belonging. Shifting

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<sup>11</sup> Balls – the shortened form of ballroom figuratively positions itself with the definition as a place for gay men to congregate. Reductively placing its definition in relation to male testes (symbolising masculinity), ball room can also figuratively refer to testicular room – which implies that there should be room for masculinity.

However, balls can also refer to having courage, ‘nerve’ or being audacious.

definitions demonstrates that the balls are not only a space for gay men and drag queens to perform. Balls can be viewed as a form of community that in return “creates a sense of belonging for those who are rejected and marginalised by society because they do not conform to the white heterosexist, patriarchal culture, what is called dominant culture” (Mine Egbatan 16). The shared rejection, oppression, and deviation from the dominant culture are the ways in which ballroom culture is constructed and held together in the form of a community by way of the houses. Dominant culture often forgets that culture is “characterised by internal variation” that adds to its vibrancy (Sharan Merriam et al. 411). Being so far from the dominant culture forces queer individuals to create their own culture, language, and social practices through participating in the ballroom with and against one another. It is also viewed as a place where you can be bold and courageous with your representation. Therefore, with the balls there is always a sense of newness, enjoyment, and celebration that facilitates a safe space for queer individuals to congregate.

The narrative of transgender women in *Paris is Burning* centres around a sense of community among queer individuals and how their lived experiences influence one another. The two cinematic pieces not only centre queer subculture in New York, but they give us a nuanced approach to the challenge’s transgender women face. These challenges arise out of the inability of transgender women to pass in society and gain access. Realising that these challenges are not only experienced by one, but all transgender women at some stage in their lives, brings forth a sense of community. In recognising a shared pain there is a demonstration and celebration of a life full of resilience and cultural knowledge, knowledge that the ballroom represents.

In a conversation between house mother Blanca Evangelista and Damon on what a ball really is, simple language is used to describe the complexity of the lived experience of the ballroom culture. Blanca is a transgender woman of colour, who is diagnosed with HIV in the pilot episode. She is also the mother of the house of Evangelista and works as a nail technician at a beauty salon. Blanca found Damon, a young gay black man, dancing in Central Park as a way to support himself while living on the streets. Blanca wants to recruit Damon as the primary dancer for her upstart house and takes him to his first ball. Blanca then goes on to describe what a ball is in conversation:

Damon:           So, what exactly is a ball?

- Blanca: Balls are a gathering of people who are not welcome to gather anywhere else. A celebration of a life that the rest of the world does not deem worthy of celebration. There are categories, people dress up for them. WALK. There's voting, trophies.
- Damon: Oh, oh! Can you make money?
- Blanca: Better than money. You can actually make a name for yourself by winning a trophy or two. In *our* community, the glory of your name is *everything*. Now we not going to be walking the red carpet at the Oscars, but it is our moment to be a star. Welcome to the Ballroom World! Realness is what it is all about. Be able to fit into the straight white world – to embody the American dream. We do not have access to that dream. And it is not because of ability, *trust me!* I mean is that not what you are trying to do? Dance your way into that world of acceptability. (*POSE*, s1:e1)

This scene does not only define and list the components of a ball, but it also gives us an indication of the way representation is constructed to favour 'white cis-hetero' individuals and thereby making it the standard for all representation. The lack of access a queer individual have, simply because they are not (in the case of transgender women of colour) white and male, poses a significant challenge to the standard of living of queer individuals. Even though queer individuals have the ability to fit in and take part in society, it is not recognised by the standard given to those who participate in the American Dream. This denial to participate in the American Dream is the same in the South African context, often black and queer individuals are not given the opportunity to participate. It is important to note that race plays a part in the recognition and value of an individual's lived experience. And although the demonstrations in the ballroom depict passing as cis-hetero in the professions of white individuals in 1987, the ballroom is comprised of a largely black and multicultural group of individuals. The standard of living for transgender women and queer individuals of colour is therefore continuously threatened when they position themselves next to their cis-hetero counterpart. The attempt to fit into that world, by means of passing, to improve your standard of living depends on your proximity to whiteness, heterosexuality and representing as cis.

\*\* I have to ask every trans woman: With your transition, are you trying to pass your way into that (straight white) world? Is passing your one ambition in realising yourself? Shouldn't you be passing to be yourself?

Now I know this all might sound very confrontational, but the implications of misunderstanding the representation (and lived experience) of transgender women of colour has led to an increase in the number of violent murders that occur. (So, this seems warranted). Kirsten Schilt and Danya Lagos states that “research also reveals that trans women of colour have a higher risk of becoming murder victims than white trans women and all trans men” (432).

I have to ask every cis person: What is so complicated about understanding anything that is different to you? Why do you persist in the preservation of anti-trans attitudes<sup>12</sup> in society when no threat actually exists? Why is it your mission to *other* people only to make yourself feel superior? \*\*

## 2.2 The Realness - Touch it, Taste it, Work it, Feel it<sup>13</sup>

The titles of the two cinematic works allow us to explore certain aspects of passing and what that has meant for the transgender community, not only in America, but around the world. *Paris is Burning* signifies the (re/de)construction of Western perspectives of gender through performing gender categories in society at the balls. It is argued that drag is not about women (although it could be)<sup>14</sup> but rather about the “inversion or subversion of traditional gender

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<sup>12</sup> Anti-transgender attitudes and sentiments exist as **transphobia** and combine the gender identity and sex of transgender women. These attitudes and sentiments are largely based on a dislike of women, especially transgender women.

<sup>13</sup> This title was inspired by the hit song “*The Realness*” by RuPaul. The song speaks about realness and the embodiment of the self and the other. The lyrics also contrast the response of society that deem the emotions and feelings of transgender individuals as invalid, with the response of the self that reinforces the realness of one's feelings.

<sup>14</sup> RuPaul stated in a 2018 interview that he probably would not have admitted transgender contestant Peppermint to participate in *RuPaul's Drag Race* – a drag queen competition in America – if she had started gender affirming surgeries (Vox, 2018). These comments are insensitive and demonstrate the ways in which black gay men and cis individuals gatekeep the representations of gender and attempt to determine the criteria for who gets to participate. This statement is detrimental to the trans community as it reinforces social



roles... [S]cholars] praise drag queens for demonstrating that gender displays do not correlate to anatomical gender” (Egbatan 17). Because performed gender does not correlate to assigned sex, it does not (and should not) take away from the gender being performed/identified. This form of viewing gender should be applied to individuals who are transgender too. In the case of transgender women, their assigned sex does not imply that their gender will be male. Therefore, “[t]he discussion of gender (liminality) cannot take place without locating the category in a specific historical context and must address its relations to modernisation and change” (Roen 258). It is important to note that even though *Paris is Burning* and *POSE* both focus on HRT and gender reassignment surgery,<sup>15</sup> transgender women in the twenty first century do not always undergo these forms of medical intervention. It should be merely an option; however, it forms a part in the reconstruction of gender as determined by society.

The reconstruction of gender in the categories is best exemplified by passing through representation and obtaining a “degree of successful imitation of gender performance” that is “equated with conformity to what is dictated as right in the society, conforming mostly to heterosexual norms” (Egbatan 18). The title of *POSE* begs us to ask some necessary questions when it comes to passing. These questions involve an extension of the idea that transgender women are imitating or posing as someone they are not. Who are transgender women posing as? How does one pose as a woman, as heterosexual? The assumption of imposing is related to the stereotype that transgender women are not who they say they are. In relation to the ballroom, it can be interpreted that transgender women are walking around with a mask that hides their true<sup>16</sup> identity. But a transgender woman’s identity is the identity she assigns for herself, not the one society or a medical professional assign to her. When the gender representation of transgender women is aligned with the gender representations of cisgender

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perceptions that transgender women need to have surgery in order to be acknowledged and respected as a woman in society. RuPaul continued to state that changing your gender medically changes the ways in which drag is viewed – as if women cannot be drag queens (Vox, 2018). However, *RuPaul’s Drag Race* focuses on men and homosexuality as the core thematic determiners for the show’s participants, contradicting the notion drag is about self-expression. Even though RuPaul has pioneered the commercialisation of queer and drag culture, the statement lacks social awareness of the lived experiences of transgender individuals and ultimately disregards the contributions that have been made by the transgender community.

<sup>15</sup> This thesis will not be focusing on HRT or genital (sexual) reassignment surgery. The influence of these two means of transitioning will be explored, but I will not be discussing the procedures as they are not necessary to complete a transition. Transgender women can transition without having had any medical intervention. A transgender woman’s transition can be complete at any stage.

<sup>16</sup> Read as assigned, and as perceived by society.

heterosexual individuals, they are then seen as ‘real’ or authentic in society. However, it is important to note that the (re/de)construction of gender norms occurs when transgender women take specific elements of the cis aesthetic for themselves and reset the standards for representation. When positioning realness in society and performance, we see”

‘Realness’ is not exactly a category in which one competes; it is a standard that is used to judge any given performance within the established categories. And yet what determines the effect of realness is the ability to compel belief, to produce the naturalized effect. This effect is itself the result of an embodiment of norms, a reiteration of norms, an impersonation of a racial and class norm, a norm which is at once a figure, a figure of a body, which is no particular body, but a morphological ideal that remains the standard which regulates the performance, but which no performance fully approximates (Butler 129).

Realness as a determiner of success for queer individuals to achieve speaks to the social requirements set by cis individuals and this requires great effort to produce. Butler in her work notes that the neutralisation of queer individuals’ gender non-conformity signals a shift to conforming to gender requirements set forth by heterosexuality and cisgender individuals by performing in these categories. In addition to the shift to conformity, it is noted that the ideals set forth for cisgender (heterosexual) representation that can never be fully reached or achieved through performance or reproduction. In *Paris is Burning*, realness is defined as:

To be able to blend, that’s what realness is. If you can pass the untrained eye, or even the trained eye and not give away that you are gay (trans). The idea of realness is that you look as much as possible as your straight counterpart. It is not a take-off or a satire. No, it is actually being able to be it. It is like going back into the closet. When they are undetectable. When they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight, into the subway and get home; and still have all their clothes and no blood is running off their body, those are the *fem realness queens* (Dorian Corey, *Paris is Burning*, 1991).

With passing, as cisgender and embodying realness, there is an added advantage of protection from discrimination and violence with the improved access to certain spaces and privileges. However, realness and passing functions in a way that coerces trans individuals to hide their transgender identity. This means that the access and safety afforded to transgender women of colour is because their transness is invisible and speaks to their (complete) assimilation into

cisgender aesthetics. Because transgender women are so *real* and undetectable, conforming to the aesthetics of cisgender individuals effectively erases their lived experience.

*Paris is Burning*, although not directly theorising intersectionality, speaks about the oppressive intersections queer individuals face. This particular reference displays the intersections of black gay men who participate in the ballroom scene. However, although the documentary focuses on gay men, the concept of passing/realness applied to their sexual orientation. The intersectional factors and effect of passing can be seen in a conversation a father has with his gay black son, “I remember my dad telling me ‘that you have three strikes against you, that every black man has two – that they are black and male – but you are black, gay and you are male. If you are gonna do this, you are gonna have to be strong’” (*Paris is Burning*, 1991).

In the theorising of black queer lives, here for gay men, they have three things – strikes – that count against them in the dominant culture as described above. The advice given to the young gay man by his father notes that to live a life that deviates from dominant culture requires strength and resilience because of these strikes. For transgender women, there are more strikes, and they are more severe – they are female, black, trans and heterosexual. Intersectionality allows us to recognise the ways in which identity factors (or social forces) operate in “layered or additive ways” (Surya Monro and Diane Richardson 3). The intersections of their identity factors all function in unison to create a particular lived experience. To make it in dominant culture, transgender women have to occupy a space in cis representation that brings them closer to being cisgender. This lived experience is often positioned in a hierarchy with white heterosexual Christian cisgender men at the top and transgender women of colour at the bottom.

“Everybody needs someone else to make themselves feel superior.

That line ends with us though.

This runs downhill.

Past the Women,

Blacks,

Latins,

Gays,

Until it reaches the bottom and lands on

Our kind.” (Lulu Abundance, *POSE*, s1:e2)

Clearly race plays a major role in establishing social hierarchy, followed by gender and sexuality. In the aforementioned quote, Lulu Abundance, after getting kicked out of a gay bar with Blanca Evangelista, notes this hierarchy and attempts to explain to the viewers and Blanca the social positioning of transgender women of colour in society. This social hierarchy is still present in society today and takes on a more nuanced approach through the form of colourism. The words of Lulu were also written in the hierarchical structure that positions transgender women at the bottom of the social order. This technique of listing the demographics from the top down also depicts the ways in which prejudice is experienced based on the identity traits you possess. With the hierarchy, we see that white heterosexual masculinity is positioned at the top and is set as the standard or norm (Crenshaw 143). This standard is fixed, because white men have the most (almost unparalleled) access in society to healthcare, job opportunities and personal improvement. Dorian Corey accurately notes this privilege, “When you are gay, you are monitored for everything, but you can do whatever you want when you’re straight” (*Paris is Burning*, 1991). This is still known to be true in many instances in society, culture, and government. But it is not only when you are gay; this also happens when you are transgender as well. People specifically watch you until you have made a move that is incongruent with your gender and then attempt to persecute you for your gender deviance.

Jules Fuddy notes that the perception of passing places as unoriginal because “the underlying norms within dominant sociological accounts continue to conceptualise passing as the ability of a person to be considered as a member of ‘another’ – presumably stable and ‘natural’ – social group or identity category than the one to which a person is ‘originally’ considered to belong” (63).

Passing in society is constructed in the likeness of whiteness. This construction comes with the identification of whiteness as the main dream to aspire to with your representation and life aspirations. It should also be noted that passing – by means of conforming to the cis-hetero – comes at recognising your own skin colour first and then establishing yourself in relation to the standard. White cis-hetero men are then considered stable and natural, with every other skin colour and gender representation being othered. With passing, you attempt to adjust your behaviour with the intention to assimilate into a particular dominant culture, forgoing your origins and transitioning into a group that you did not originally belong to. This in effect erases a part of the trans women's journey. Passing places a social pressure on minority groups

(especially transgender women) to conform to the ideals of cisgender individuals. This pressure creates unrealistic expectations of transgender people to survive and be integrated into society.

“This is *white* America.

Any other nationality that is not of the *white* set, knows this and accepts this to the day they die.

That is everybody’s dreams and ambition as a minority – to live and look as well as the white person.

It is pictured as being American.

Every media you have from TV, to magazines, to movies, to films.

I mean the biggest thing a minority watches *Dynasty*, *The Colbys*, *All My Children*, the soap operas.

This is *white* America. And when it comes to minorities, *especially* black – we as a people, of the past four hundred years, is the greatest example of behaviour modification in the history of civilization.

We have had everything taken away from us, and yet we have all learned how to survive.

That is why in the ballroom circuit, it is so obvious, that if you have captured the great *white* way of *living*, or *looking*, or *dressing*, or *speaking*

You *is* a marvel.” (*Paris is Burning*, 1991)

As a minority, when you are able to pass, you are seen as something extraordinary in your community. This perception is given because as a transgender woman, if you can take on the qualities of whiteness then you are seen as talented and a master in your field. Because not all transgender women and queer individuals are able to go undetected in society. In the ballroom, we can see that the taking on of white aesthetics and actions is known as representation and behaviour modification. For transgender women, this modification can occur in so many ways, for example the face, body, clothing, and documents.

## 2.3 The Category is ...<sup>17</sup>

With the construction of categories in the ballroom, we can see that there are many influences of the every-day whiteness in them. Even though categories are depicted as spaces for queer individuals to show off their ability to pass, their creativity, and their dance moves, there exists (often at times) rigid requirements for the representation of masculinities and femininities that are performed and echoed in society. In society “the ideological ‘codes’ for gender and sexuality are learned early in the socialisation process, entrenched during adolescence and transmitted in large part by the popular culture” (Linda Kalof 639)<sup>18</sup>. Therefore, the influence of popular media reinforces the establishment of gender and sexuality norms that queer individuals invert in these categories and simultaneously conform to. In the categories the learning of these ideological codes occurs over a short amount of time and at any stage in the socialisation process. These requirements come in the form of focusing on certain physical aspects of an individual that they have enhanced or are proud of.

Dorian Corey and Pepper Labeija note that ballroom representation has shifted over the decades based on the influence of mainstream media and the fame associated with certain representations that were favoured at the time. With this influence, the categories of the ballroom have changed and now focus on more modern representations of being that are closely related to society. The change in the categories displays a move from the extravagant representations of drag queens and showgirls to more neutral and natural representations of gender vocations in society. Below the two quotes show how categories progressed overtime:

When I first started going to balls, it was all about drag queens. They were interested in looking like Las Vegas show girls – back pieces, tail pieces, feathers, beads and all that. But as the seventies rolled around, then things started changing. It started coming down to wanting to look like a gorgeous movie star, like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor. And now from that to trying to look like models, like Iman, Christie Brinkley (Pepper Labeija, *Paris is Burning*, 1991).

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<sup>17</sup> This heading is taken from *POSE* and *Paris is Burning*. Each category begins with the declaration of the specific category that house children will be participating in for the evening.

<sup>18</sup> Refer to subsection Moffie! In Chapter 3: Women writing women: - that speaks about the influence of gender codes prescribed by Coloured culture in Cape Town and how gender is policed and conveyed internally based on external influences.

Everyone could not be a Las Vegas showgirl; everyone couldn't put on a stack of feathers and a big head piece. So, they made the categories for everybody. That is what really made the balls change. So, there was more involvement. Everyone that goes to one of these affairs now near damn participates. Eventually over the years, they have all walked the runway in some category or another. Either you have a nice body, or you are very fashionable, or you are very pretty, or you're very *real* looking (Dorian Corey, *Paris is Burning*, 1991).

The early gender representation within the ballroom scene focuses on drag queens that continuously challenge and dismantle gender norms in society through their performance, but the influence of passing seems to undermine the very premise in society through conformity and through the incorporation of categories from the real world. Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija demonstrate the ways in which the ballroom categories focus on the inclusion of all queer individuals through the reproduction of cisgender norms. Jen Richards notes that the change in aesthetics for celebrities and women stem

Out of a change in aesthetics that comes out of the kind of gay men who are often doing the styling for female celebrities. And that for them it comes out of the street queens that they know from the clubs. And for them it comes out of, ultimately, the sex workers who have to hyper-feminise their body in order to compete for clients in order to survive. And of course, they are then imitating an older version of femininity that they learn that men like from movies and TV, and it sort of create this ultimate cycle (*Disclosure*, 2020).

With the changing of the time and the influence of mainstream media, there is also the recognition of the move from non-conformity to gender conforming through the modification of either your appearance, body, or language. Dorian Corey and Pepper LaBeija note the move from extravagant social representation that involves overexaggerating cisgender norms to the inclusion of the everyday representations that allow queer individuals to dream, be celebrated and recognised.

The conventions applied to white women are then transferred to transgender women. It creates a sense that transgender women are meant to conform to the binary representations of gender. Kalof notes that the depictions of men and women in society have largely been in relation to power, with men viewed as dominant and women as submissive “and constantly trying to entertain, please, gratify, satisfy and flatter men with their sexuality” (640) – a consistent theme

in mainstream media. The beauty conventions for white women are established by appealing to the white male gaze. This appeal is often formed based on hypersexualising the self in order to pass and be recognised. Because of this power imbalance and the construction of the gender binary, women are always viewed as powerless and in service to masculinity.

The conventions of a white woman's life seem to be the aspiration of transgender women of colour because white women have access and recognition in society. Janet Mock notes that, as a transgender woman of colour in white cis-hetero society, it does not matter what you do. For her, "no matter how I moisturised my curls, how tight my body, how bright my smile, I was largely overlooked in a racist, patriarchal culture that placed the beauty of thin, white, blonde women on a pedestal. Whoever was closest to that ideal was scene and sought. All others were ignored" (Mock 60).

There will be no recognition of your identity unless you position yourself as close as possible to the ideal and appeal of dominant society. White cisgender women are centred in the patriarchal culture of representation as attractive – and the closer you are to that standard the more you are accepted and acknowledged.<sup>19</sup> Mock indirectly speaks to the concept of colourism, where your proximity to whiteness in being light-skinned (or coloured) grants you recognition, value and access. In her experience "their beauty was heightened and celebrated because of their closeness to whiteness" (Mock 60). Jules Fuddy notes that this proximity to whiteness allows you to "enjoy the temporary and precarious privileges" it has (62). Elektra Abundance, in *POSE*, who is considered to be one of the most passable transgender women in the series, who at first is a kept woman but later engages in sex work, was the mother of the house of Abundance and represented the narrative of a kept woman, notes that her dreams and ability to pass are in line with the privileges and access of white cisgender women in a dispute with Blanca:

Look at me, look at you! I can *pass*, I can strut down Fifth Avenue when the sun is sitting *high* as my cheek bones and be waited on at Bergdorf same as any white women, while you hide in the shadows (*POSE*, s1:e1).

The construction of the ballroom not only provides a space for individuals to represent themselves, but it also creates a space for the origins for (female/the) representation

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<sup>19</sup> Chapter 3: Women writing women focuses on the role of colourism in my life and how my light skin places me in closer proximity to the beauty standards set forth by patriarchal culture, despite being a coloured transgender woman.



requirements for queer individuals to be accepted in society. The origins of these requirements come in the form of thematic categories that transgender women have to participate in. Kalof states that women were first portrayed in “traditional, stereotypical roles” and there was always the depiction of women as “decorative objects” where men and women are not seen as equal (641). *POSE*, as one of the first all-transgender TV series casts, centres the narratives of transgender women of colour in the most unconventional way, moving away from traditional roles of motherhood, gender representation, and social stigma. Although focusing on the ballroom scene, which may be decorative (adorned with glamorous props and garments), transgender women are seen as resilient, agential, and socially aware of their position in society. Angel Evangelista and Elektra Abundance both engage in sex work, but because they pass have moved onto finding ‘respectable’ work by going to night school and working as a hostess at Endosheen (a restaurant) respectively. Realities of transgender women and their womanhood are not often expressed; however, Mock through her work illustrates that there is more to it:

I stood in awe of women who seemed so empowered by their bodies and sexuality... only in a patriarchal society would claim a woman’s profession – respectable or not – (reflects on the man who did or did not raise her). Our culture is obsessed with raising perfect little girls who are virginal and virtuous and respectable in their womanhood, girls who do not dance on poles, trade sex for money, or THOT<sup>20</sup> around town seeking pleasure. Choice and circumstance led the women I worked with to the club. We were all driven by a desire to take charge of ourselves and to take care of our families. These women took responsibility for their lives, their bodies, and their babies in a culture that offers limited resources or opportunities to women living in low-income communities of colour. ... My feminism is rooted in the conversations I had backstage where these working women spoke it plain and persevered. ... They were paying to survive in a world that shamed them for monetizing their sexuality, something our culture demands to be available and free (18-20).

Transgender womanhood, which may contain experiences of sex work, finds itself grounded in knowing ‘how to navigate ignorance, harassment, poverty and various systematic hurdles to fulfil their needs’ (Mock 12). Transgender women are often demonised and shamed for engaging in sex work, but as Mock points out, there is a lack of resources provided to low-

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<sup>20</sup> Refers to: That over There.

income households. Often the only option is to engage in sex work. Mock also notes that the feminism she engages with takes not of the challenges and social circumstances women of colour who engaged in sex work faced. Sex work is a respectable profession, it is because men demonise it because they expect it for free and aim to control even the sexuality of a woman by placing her to this category. For the beauty standards of transgender women, a lot of it is focused on the body and how femininity is represented. In the ballroom certain categories represent and focus on certain things pertaining to female representation.

“The category is PERFECT 10.

You must have [the] *face*, *body*, and *realness*.

You have something to tuck?

that better be streamlined into invisibility.

You have to PASS in *every* way, bitches!

Your *hair* has to PASS!

Your *clothes* have to PASS!

Your *makeup* has to PASS!

Your *face* has to PASS!

PASSING is your gateway into the mainstream.

If you want access into that world, you had best come *immaculate*!

This is a category for ‘*real women*’ only.

If you ain’t Diana-*fucking*-Ross, ready to sing the theme to Mahogany,

DON’T YOU STEP FOOT ON THAT  
FLOOR!

GOD has bestowed upon you a great many gifts: Charm, Beauty, Sensuality,

But the one thing that you can thank *him* for,

Is that *he* made you a woman.

*Perfection,*

*Shine* woman.

*Glow* woman.

Give us permission to celebrate you,

IN ALL YOUR FEMININE GLORY.” Pray Tell, (*POSE*, s1:e5)

For transgender women, the requirements to be cisgender seem to be never-ending. The abovementioned quote mentions only a few ways in which cisgender individuals expect transgender women to conform, however, beyond body, face and realness there is the need to conform in every single way. Most times in society the “image descriptions deal with a woman’s physical attractiveness and sensuality” (Kalof, 1993:644). From the expectations placed on transgender women, body dysmorphia becomes one of the main concerns in a trans woman’s life, with an intense need to align the body with the self. Added to this is the makeup, clothing, voice, hair, and behaviour as categories of conformation for transgender women. There are many ways in which the requirements for passing can be interpreted, and for transgender women, the less you have to work on, the more privilege you have in society. For trans women, the requirements vary – not everyone gets gender reassignment or facial feminisation surgery, uses hormones, changes their clothing, or their body structure. Some only change their name and pronouns and it should be enough, *because there is no universal way to (re)present as a woman*. However, even though there is no uniform representation to cite (only the ideal) in these categories (and the ballroom), there is an element of exclusion that exists because one does not adhere to the requirements.

Candy Abundance, who is the daughter of Elektra, faces varying degrees of social pressure because of her body structure. Candy has significant insecurities (including gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia)<sup>21</sup> pertaining to her body structure when participating in the ballroom. Gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia can cause significant mental health implications and irrational decisions (Ohene Yaw Ampofo-Anti, 2018). Elektra stops Candy from walking in a category that is not suited for her body type. The category which Candy wants to walk in

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<sup>21</sup> Gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia are the terms used to describe the social anxieties associated with a “person’s discontentment with their assigned gender identity and body” (Wilson et al, 2014:1). Gender dysphoria refers to “variable levels of mental distress associated with gender incongruence” (Wilson et al, 2014:1). For body dysmorphia, it is the mental stress associated with certain parts of your body that do not match up to your self-assigned gender.

focuses entirely on body, and the curves associated with feminine bodily representation. In this conversation, we can see that there is a huge disconnect in the perceptions of beauty for transgender women in society:

“Pray Tell: The category is... “Beautiful, bodacious body!”

Elektra: Candy, who do you think you are fooling with? (points to Candy)

Candy: I am not tryna fool nobody. I am serving body. This is how I see myself.

Elektra: You are not going out there and embarrassing my good name, my house.

Candy: This is ballroom, categories were created so that we could live out our fantasies. We get to be who we want to be, and this is the image I wanna project.

Elektra: That image is shattered and distorted. If you are going to serve a look, it must be suited to you, it must be streamlined and flattering. Most of all it must be *REAL*.

Candy: As *real* as that wig on your head?

Elektra: *Real*?! Huh, these legs are *real*, these cheekbones are *real*, this whistled waist is *real*. I will never judge a girl for enhancements, but they need to convince a sceptical audience seeking for falsities. If you walk out that door, you might as well be walking as an Evangelista – ‘cause I only raise winners.

Pray Tell: ... Excuse me, Miss Candy. Stop the god-damn music.” (*POSE*, s1:e4).

Even though categories are a place for individuals to live out their fantasy, there seems to be underlying requirements per category, where details matter. In the category, and the episode, particular emphasis is placed on the type of body structure a woman has. Eve Oishi notes that the category’s competitors, such as Candy and Elektra, are judged on their ability to emulate the real (265). In this emulation, Elektra notes that if any transgender women wish to walk a category (or life), whatever look they decide on must be done in a manner so convincing that it removes all doubt of her assigned gender. For Butler, the inability to read any sign of the assigned gender means “the approximation of realness appears to be achieved, the body performing, and the ideal performed appear indistinguishable” (129). The episode focuses on the underground lengths transgender women go to in order to access particular cosmetic and medical services in order to improve their lives and their representation. These cosmetic and medical services require transgender women to pay excessive amounts of money on surgery that would allow them to better conform and fit into society. It is also clear, that in the

categories and the world we function in, there is a need to conform to the physical representations of gender.

In the dialogue below between Ms Orlando, Candy, and Angel there is specific reference to the ways in which transgender women ought to represent. The representation of transgender women should be closely aligned with the sexual needs of cisgender white heterosexual men and the qualities assigned to the sexuality of white women. The opinions given by the transgender women below speak to the reality of many transgender women in Western societies. For opinions on the Third world experience of transgender women in Cape Town, refer to Chapter 4: Women of their own experience.

“Ms Orlando: The good Lord made all the girls who wanna be skinny, fat. And all the girls who are fat, skinny. But Ms Orlando is here to make things right. Do not be jealous of a perfect mug.

Angel: How come you less than half the price of Clarissa?

Ms Orlando: Because Clarissa gets her silicone from a doctor in the upper-west side. I go to Honduras and get the same shit for pennies.

Angel: The exact same?

Ms Orlando: (Hesitates) It is some difference. But I add some of my own ingredients to make it the same.

Candy: Like what?

Ms Orlando: Are you guys here to be beautified, or steal my proprietary secrets? *You cannot pass without curves*; I say this with love. Look at me, men throw themselves at me. Every man wants a plump lip and a luscious breast.” (*POSE*, s1:e4)

In this instance, the requirement of being curvy is directly noted and not expressed indirectly through patriarchal ideals, white heterosexuality, or medical prescriptions. Ms Orlando, however, notes that to possess curves is to make your body pass, and this form of passing is still in relation to appealing to the desires of men. It is because of the desires of men that Ms Orlando finds herself in the business of running an underground plastic surgery injection service. By engaging in the underground markets, Candy and Angel are “simultaneously able to pass as real and produce pleasurable commentaries on the politics of their own

representations” (Oishi 260). These injections are not the typical hormone injections that transgender women often use to shift their weight distribution to acquire the curvaceous figure of an attractive woman; instead they are formulated with her own ingredients and administered in a non-sterile environment. Surinder Kaur reminds us of the social pressures to conform to certain heterosexual gendered bodily ideals that are placed on queer and particularly transgender women to adopt “normal ways of life to appear accepted in society” (13). It should be noted that these services are not readily available and to do them the correct way requires money thus making it highly inaccessible to many transgender women. Because of its inaccessibility and the lack of money to pay for it, transgender women are largely forced to use underground services in order to facilitate their becoming.

The extremes to which some transgender women go in order to access these services is ultimately unwarranted and adversely affects their lives. Candy questions why the price of the cosmetic procedure is half that of another service provider called Clarissa. To this question, Ms Orlando replies that her formula comes from Honduras and not America and is specially formulated with her own ingredients - not only to make it the same but cheaper. The health risks associated with black-market cosmetic procedures are not only internal but external. Candy subsequently faced many health issues and collapsed during the ‘*body*’ category and upon inspection found lumps on her hips. The dangers associated to black market surgeries are never explained and often plague transgender women more than other queer bodies. Often for transgender women in Cape Town the option of consulting, utilising, and participating in the black-market does not exist, because of limited access and knowledge.

Passing for transgender women should be based on their own representation requirements and not that of an ideal’s placed on ciswomen. The representation of transgender women in media should echo the problematics of these requirements for transgender women that come in the form of medical, psychological, and legal regulations. Creating their own requirements for their representation allows them to not only move outside the binary, but also shape the “aesthetic and formal choices of a later generation” (Oishi 267). For transgender women, being able to change your clothing, makeup, body, and face structure, accessing medical services and changing/choosing your name is one way of recognising who they are and contributes to “changing the person and allowing them to pass as cisgender” (Kuar 15). The femininity of transgender women of colour should be their own, the same for ciswomen, and should not be equated to that of white women, where race plays a part in the representation of women (Egatan 20). By self-defining the representation requirements for transgender women of colour, they

are able to move beyond the confines of race, biological sex, and social definitions of womanhood. Schilt and Lagos notes that more attention should be paid to the “subjectivities of transgender people and the different consequences that cis and transgender people might face if they do not ‘live up to the normative conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity’ in everyday interactions” (430).

## **2.4 Perfection, Deception, Perception**

For transgender women who pass, there exists an inherent need to be immensely socially aware about one’s representation in society. The fixation on and paranoia around one’s identity representation stems from the need to pass as cisgender in order to avoid social stigmas and discrimination. This social awareness manifests itself in the form of anxiety surrounding the body. When transgender women fall outside of the binary, there is a social need to conform to the gender binary in a dominant society. Transgender women who are outside of the binary do not pass, and “may be counselled to alter their bodies or encouraged to perfect a new gender presentation so that they may ‘pass’ as the ‘other sex’” (Patricia Gagne and Deanna McGaughey 112). When a transgender women’s representation and gender expression falls outside of the binary, it becomes compulsory for them to adopt a gender identity that falls within the binary by altering their gender representation and expression. These representation altering methods include medical and cosmetic procedures – including gender reassignment surgery, breast implants, hormone replacement therapy and electrolysis. Gagne and McGaughey remind us that “appearance is a central component in the establishment and maintenance of self and identity” through the “altering of their physical characteristics to conform to beliefs about ‘appropriate’ appearance for their desired gender” (115). This social pressure to conform places unrealistic pressures and expectations for transgender women that are inaccessible and ultimately expensive. There is a need for the interpretations of gender passing for transgender women that does not focus on the “challenges passing poses to dominant groups mechanisms of social control or the maintenance of social hierarchies, but rather on the psychic role of passing and its power to enable passing individuals’ self-actualisation” (Billard 7). This interpretation involves the realisation of a transgender woman’s identity and her self-image.

Transgender women who pass as cisgender are often perceived as deceptive individuals who engage in the practice of tricking men into sleeping with them. Because transgender women deviate from the gender binary and come into their own, deviating does not mean deviance.<sup>22</sup> In society, this type of sexual deception under the guise of (mis)representing their gender identity is met with emotional, physical and institutional violence. For deception to be utilised as a way of interpreting transgender passing, would be to assume that transgender women are lying about their womanhood and gender identity. The accusations of the *apparent* unauthentic representations of gender for transgender women are reproduced through words such as ‘secret, lied, tricked, misled, posed, true gender, real’ that seeks to invalidate and *expose* (Kirsten Schilt and Laurel Westbrook 454). These words function as a means of assigning the culpability of the murder to the transgender victim and *revealing* their ‘true’ gender. Often a transgender woman’s true gender is perceived by cisgender individuals as their assigned sex and not their gender identity; the two are often misunderstood and equated by cisgender individuals.<sup>23</sup> The defence of most transgender murder perpetrators are that transgender women have concealed or withheld their ‘true’ gender identity during sexual engagements and this places the blame on transgender women for their own murder (Billard 5). A transgender woman’s true gender is the gender she assigns to herself; her true gender is not the coerced, violent delineation of gender in society.

Transgender women are often accused of hiding their assigned sex and by conforming in practice erase a part of themselves when unable to be accepted as themselves. Passing as cisgender therefore requires transgender women to erase crucial parts of their history and becoming in order to maintain a gender identity that does not deviate. For transgender women who pass, the fear of detection is alleviated in some instances – when there exists no physical trace of their assigned gender. Transgender women hide their identity because of the social stigma that surrounds the understanding of the transgender experience. In this way transgender women who pass are forced to separate themselves from transgender women who do not pass in order to not be detected, creating a social divide within the community. However, these women are still revered for their ability to pass and obtain access into this world. With this

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<sup>22</sup> Refer to Chapter 2: “The Que(e)ry” subsection 2.1 for Ballard’s definition of passing as being a deviant form of gender representation.

<sup>23</sup> This false equivalence stems from the fact that cisgender individuals have never had to question whether or not their gender identity and assigned sex are congruent.



secrecy, transgender women often live an isolated and segregated life in order to maintain their ability to pass. In the transgender community, women who go undetected:

We viewed these women as legends. They were *unclockable*, blending effortlessly into the narrow confines of externally defined womanhood. No one questioned their womanhood. They went undetected. Because of this rare access, they were non-disclosing in most spaces; they lived a life of, for a lack of a better term, *stealth*. They kept their origin stories to themselves. They navigated the world with confidence, *no one knew*. Many hid and continue to hide because they were taught that being trans was impossible – even dangerous (Mock 16-17).

When a transgender woman is viewed as deceptive, it is often because her ‘true’<sup>24</sup> gender is based on reductive social misunderstandings between gender identity and sex. Because a transgender woman might have a penis, she is viewed as a man. The focus on genitalia (assigned sex) reduces the lived experience of transgender individuals and diminishes their humanity. Whether or not a transgender woman has had genital (re)assignment surgery does not determine or validate her womanhood. There is a misconception that, because a transgender woman is pre-op, she is not viewed as a woman and as soon as she has a vagina (post-op) she is considered a woman. This misconception focuses solely on the body to justify womanhood and not the lived experience. It is perceived that transgender women who are pre-op are considered to have the incorrect biology and “postoperative transwomen, as they possess the ‘correct’ biological credentials to do gender’ as women in sexual relations’ (Schilt and Westbrook 456). Sex in this way is influenced by the desires and functions of heterosexuality and the performance of vaginal sex with a penis as a means of defining gender. Gender identity does not function in this way and recognises the womanhood of transgender women based on their lived experience and not their biology.

The language used to describe transgender women who are murdered at the hands of cisgender men is based on sex and is often degrading, derogatory and dehumanising. It focuses on the assigned birth of a transgender women that aims to ridicule and invalidate their womanhood. Transgender women are viewed as sexual predators that misrepresent their gender identity to cisgender individuals. The identity of transgender women in news media has often signalled a focus on falsifying their identity and the wearing of the female gender. These definitions demonstrate the ways in which passing influences an individuals’ perception of the gender

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<sup>24</sup> Read as assigned.

represented. In this way passing becomes being perceived as cisgender, which is often interpreted as the appearance of cisgender. Schilt and Westbrook notes that,

Texts included those identifying a murder victim as wearing clothing, jewellery, and/or makeup associated with a gender other than the one they were labelled at birth; naming a murder victim *as transsexual, transgender, a cross-dresser, or a transvestite*; and/ or describing the victim of fatal violence *as a man in a dress, a man posing as a woman, passed as a woman, a woman posing as a man, female impersonator, or a woman who is really a man* (445).

The representation of transgender women as gender imposters, posers, and imitators all focus on female gender presentation through falsehood. In all of these instances, dominant society lays claim to the devaluation of human life through invalidation and humiliation. In these instances, transgender women are reductively viewed as men who wear or perform gender with malicious intent. It is often with the interpretation that gender and sex are equated with understanding womanhood and gender identity. Biological sex and social gender are supposed to match, dominant society argues that “the truth here is determined by bodily, rather than social, criteria” where “where women with penises are seen as sexual deceivers” (Schilt and Westbrook 456). Because of the socio-economic exclusivity of gender reassignment surgery, the essentialist view of equating gender with assigned sex excludes a large number of transgender women who do not base their definition of what it means to be a woman on their genitalia. The “Anti-essentialists of the third wave (feminism) repeatedly argued that such universalising claims about women are always false, and function oppressively to normalise particular – socially and culturally privileged – forms of feminine experience” (Stone 16).

There is no uniform/universal representation for women in society; not all women look the same and this lack of uniformity justifies the inclusion of transgender women in womanhood. Justification for the inclusion of transgender women is always needed in the eyes of law and policy makers. For this type of exclusion, there is an inherent need to move away from the need for transgender women to pass as one gender or neither of them. Roen echoes the premise that there should be a merging of conformity and non-conformity because “many trans people [already] strategically and agilely live with aspects of passing and aspects of crossing (genders) in their lives and may regard abandoning either component as idealistic or impossible” (521). Transgender women must face the reality that there are some aspects of their gender representation that they cannot change and there are others that they can. For a transgender

women's representation to be suited for her "and streamlined to perfection," an amalgamation of the two would be an ideal fit (*POSE*, s1:e5). The representation of transgender women should not then depend on biologically or physically representing as cisgender in order to be validated, accepted, and integrated. Because not being able to pass has resulted "in transgender individuals to be more likely to experience discrimination" demonstrating the importance of "engaging in conversations that dispel the idea of passing and gender conformity as a successful marker of transition" (Stephanie Begun and Shanna Kattari 63). Therefore, passing as cisgender should not be utilised as a means for individuals to be recognised as their assigned gender or a means to exclude women with penises. Mock articulates the realities of this exclusion:

*I now know that the world can be a brutal place for a girl with a penis. Many cis people assume that trans women, whether they "pass" as cis or not, are pretending to be someone we are not, and often expect us to disclose that we are trans to all we meet. Disclosure should be an individual personal choice based on circumstances such as safety, access, and resources. When disclosure occurs for a trans woman, whether by choice or by another person, she is often accused of deception because, as the widely accepted misconception goes, trans women are not 'real' women (161).*

Forcing transgender women to reveal their history and journey to womanhood places them in a precarious position that is susceptible to violence and discrimination. Those who do not disclose can live a life evading these social violations; those who do, have to face them constantly. When a transgender woman discloses that she is transgender, those around her often feel betrayed and deceived. Richards "hates the idea of disclosure because it presupposes that there is something to disclose. It reinforces the assumption that there is a secret that is hidden and that I have the responsibility to tell others, and that presupposes that the other person might have some kind of issue or problem with what's to be disclosed; and that their feelings matter more than mine" (*Disclosure*, 2020). Society often centres the feelings of dominant culture over minorities. The idea that transgender women are hiding who they are creates all kinds of misconceptions that put them at a disadvantage to be heard, recognised, or valued in society.

The misconception that transgender women are inauthentic women stems from the justification that biology is necessary to validate any social claims through physical evidence. However, gender should not be viewed as opposites to one another or self-editing. It also does not acknowledge the diversity of womanhood through patriarchal oppression. "Although women

share no common understanding or experience of femininity, they are nevertheless assembled into a determinate social group through their location within this complex history” (Stone 17). Transgender women locate themselves in this complex history by presenting the overlapping intersections of their experience. Stone continues and notes that while “being female may require certain anatomical features, being a woman is something different, dependent on identification with the feminine gender (the social traits, activities and roles that make up femininity)” (18). Passing should therefore not depend on “embodying a set of expectations about normative heterosexuality and appropriate gender roles” (Stone 22). And womanhood should be founded on the connections, overlaps and intersections of cultural and historical experiences that allow for an inclusive interpretation of it. A large part of the transgender journey to womanhood is self-defining:

Self-definition has been a responsibility I’ve wholeheartedly taken on as mine. It is never a duty one should outsource. Of this responsibility, writer and poet Audre Lorde said, ‘If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.’ Self-definition and self-determination are about the many varied decisions that we make to compose and journey toward ourselves, about the audacity and strength to proclaim, create and evolve into who we know ourselves to be. It’s okay if your personal definition is in a constant state of flux as you navigate the world (Mock 172).

For transgender women, it is easy to take on the definitions and interpretations of other individuals, but at what cost would this be? The removal of the self and the erasure of one’s journey? Mock and Lorde both emphasize the need to move away from other’s definitions, interpretations, and perceptions of you in order to maintain your individuality and autonomy over the self. Lorde speaks to how, if she left the task of self-definition to dominant society, she would be restricted to other people’s rendition of who she is and “eaten alive”. Lorde speaks to how identities are often consumed, criticised and changed by dominant society and this causes significant pain, especially being conscious throughout the entire ordeal. Mock notes, that not immediately knowing who you are is typical and that you should be given the opportunity to change and mould yourself according to your experiences.

The next chapter will focus on specific memories of my life and how it has contributed to the construction of myself and my womanhood as a transgender woman of colour. I will refer to memories from my childhood, during my transition, and life at university. It will expand on the

ways in which we as individuals all contribute to each other's lived experiences. The next chapter will also form the foundation for the research work done in Chapter 4.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **Women writing women**

**A light-skinned coloured transgender woman's relationship with her body, race, and society**

Women have always influenced one another through the narratives, examples and values of the women who came before them. The experiences of womanhood are overlapping and interwoven into one another and this influence allows all women to be included in the construction of it. For me, “Womanhood becomes the practice of being a woman, whereby pre-existing forms are internalised and reinterpreted to take on new definitions and functions” (Stone 23). Learning from every woman that has come before me and finding my own womanhood through their experiences and stories, I have formulated my own definition and practices of womanhood.

In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the women in my life have contributed to the construction of my own womanhood. By placing transgender womanhood in a specific context, despite not sharing some common physical characteristics with cis women, I will demonstrate that biology does not determine identity and that “one is not born a (into) woman(hood)” (Stryker 59). In this way, we can better understand the ways in which transgender bodies are varied and subjective, as well as how dominant society utilises gender as a means for social control and dominion.

The first two sections of this chapter, “Moffie!” and “Religion,” focus on the way language and ideological belief aim to control and correct early expressions of gender/sexual deviation through recalling two particular memories. The last two sections “(In) Her Name” and “US,” reflects the beginning of my becoming and the women who have contributed to this journey while at university.

This chapter will also explore the relationship that I have with my body, race, and society. Demonstrating the ways in which the intersections of my identity as a light-skinned coloured transgender woman in Cape Town places me in specific power relations/positions on the social hierarchy. Through the retelling of particular memories, “intersectional autoethnographies work to capture the complexities of intersecting power relationships by producing multiple and diverse perspective and voices:” through the analysis and problematisation of unjust existing cultural and social practices (Jones 2).

### **3.1 *Moffie!*<sup>25</sup>**

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<sup>25</sup> Directly translated from Afrikaans, *fag*, *Moffie* refers to queer effeminate individuals who are assigned male at birth. These individuals may either turn out to be gay, queer, or transgender. The term signals the effeminate

**\*\*** When I first heard those words, it came as a shock to me. It descended upon me, like a cane meeting the hands of a juvenile delinquent whose behaviour demanded correction. Those words met the ears of everyone present, signalling that I was the problem, that who I was, was the problem.

*Jou moffie!*

I stood frozen.

*Jou moffie!*

Unable to move or navigate a situation that was beyond my control, I saw it as a simple mistake. My grandmother, two aunts and I were in the kitchen. I came in to set the bowl in the basin. Setting it down and then leaving, my jacket caught hold of the net that covered the washing machine. Everything on top of the net fell over. This was seen as my fault.

In my grandmother's two-bedroom apartment, there was not much space for a laundry room and so the washing machine stood there covered. In a coloured household, the kitchen was the meeting place for private conversations, retellings of the day gone by, and a place to study in my later years attending high school. (It was also the place I told my mother that I am transgender at age 22).

I was about six years old. The details of the memory might be hazy, but the words have left their mark. I could not believe what she, my aunt, had just said to me.

*Jou moffie!*

I felt humiliated and exposed.

She blamed me for failing to pay attention to what I was doing. I was six. I was a child, held to the standards of an adult. I was being outed and simultaneously persecuted for my difference. She knew I was queer and used that against me. She was unable to contain herself, unable to contain her prejudice.

We all stood there, in disbelief.

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nature of an individual and directly aims at dehumanising the individual for deviating from their assigned gender. The term is also used as a slur in Cape coloured language in order to manage identities through shame and exposure. "Jou Moffie" here is used to break with form, recall and emphasize the trauma experienced.



She then apologised because what she said was wrong. Was this really an apology?

This was a woman who was years my senior, shaming me for my femininity. My “femininity [was seen] as extra, as something that was forced and unnatural” (Mock 147). Shaming me for something so trivial and using my queerness against me. But I could not defend myself. I was frozen. There was nothing I could say or do to this woman. I could not scream, or shout, or cry. So, I just stood there. Held captive by the silencing that often comes with being a coloured child – that I was only to be seen and not heard. It was the first time I felt so helpless.

Not only was it wrong, but it also exposed her. It showed me that, no matter what age, you as a queer individual will be persecuted for who you are. It showed me that she was homophobic and that such social dehumanisation does not care or take into account age or familial relationships. That our kinship depended on me being cis and me being straight.

*Jou moffie!*

It came as a rebuke. She was telling me that I could not be who I was in this space. That in this space I was to be cis, male, and straight. I could not be myself; I could not be a woman. Gagne and McGaughey note that “feminine behaviours and feelings of being or wanting to be girls created confusion for young children and adolescents, particularly when they received messages that they could not be or act that way” (118). This was a direct message, that I could not be or act like a woman. This message came with the attempt to eradicate what I was feeling or doing. My behaviour was only confusing because nobody understood it. I barely understood it then! The language to describe me existed, but it was never put together in a way for me or them to understand. Even though my family spoke English most of the time, their rebukes, cussing, and violence was in Afrikaans. It came with severity, the same severity I saw when my grandmother used to tell my cousins and I about her experiences with the apartheid government.

Being effeminate was all that I knew when growing up. I was always surrounded and drawn to the common accessories, behaviours, and traits of being a woman. I took on the role of being a woman when my cousins and I played house. It felt natural to be a woman. It felt natural to be who I was around kids my age. They did not question whether I was a cis woman or not, I was the mom or the girlfriend. Only the adults sought to govern my gender identity fiercely, both with their words and their deeds – all of which I thought was unnecessary and unsupportive. I knew I was different from a young age:

Examination of the earliest recollections that transgender individuals have of feeling that either their sex or gender was ‘wrong’ or did not ‘fit’ for them are useful in providing insight into the earliest manifestations that become alternative identities. Many recollections of childhood may, in fact, be reconstructed biographies. Nonetheless, these are materials from which individuals mould current identities and, therefore, are valid and significant (Gagne and McGaughey 117).

I remembered this. I knew that this would be one of those defining moments where I would not have to tell the world that I was different, that I was a woman. Because she already did. Somehow this can be seen as a buffer for the years to come when my gender identity and representation radically changed. I was always compelled to be myself, to be the woman I was born to be. And how I came into that womanhood was my decision. Whoever she thought I was, was not who I really was. Her homophobia was misplaced. But there was pressure to perform and adhere to the traditional concepts of gender; her assessment of who I was, and my gender deviance, was a homophobic assumption (Gagne and McGaughey 118). I was not a young gay boy behaving and dressing as a woman, I was a woman. But I could never say it; I could never tell them that I was not who they assigned me to be.

Life was about challenging yourself and finding out what works for you as an individual. I had to find myself because, “just as I had no blueprint for the things that I reached for personally and professionally, my family did not have a blueprint for raising a trans child” (111). There may be no guides for how to raise a trans child, but there are guides on basic parenting. In my area of the Cape Flats, families that disown their queer kids seems to be a trend that upholds the standards of white heterosexual Christianity – where disowning your child maintains family purity. This is not in line with good parenting. Every child deserves an opportunity in order to make it in dominant society. Was my aunt just one of those individuals who did not know how to handle my difference as a young woman who was viewed as a homosexual because I was effeminate? Was she upholding the standards given to her? Was her apology sincere? Did she realise that I will always remember it?

I was a child exploring life and who I was. What was said to me made me aware of my difference and forced me to recognise that this was what people saw. What she called me might not have been appropriate but most coloured people where I lived did not know what being transgender was all about, they confuse homosexuality with be(com)ing a woman, like many cultures do. This was something everyone confused – gender identity and sexual orientation –

and I do not blame them. But as a transgender woman and identifying as coloured meant that I was continuously evolving. I found that, “Coloured identity is better understood, not as having continuously evolved and undergone a series of transformations during the era of white rule, but rather as having maintained a high degree of consistency of expression despite some changes to the identity” (Mohamed Adhikari 468).

Being a coloured transgender woman in Steenberg, Cape Town, has forced me to recognise that not only has there been consistency in the expression of my racial identity, but there has also been consistency in the expression of my gender identity. I was always effeminate. This consistency in my gender deviation was always in relation to deviating from heterosexuality and the gender binary.

Thereafter, I became immune to the taunts that followed me because my gender identity and assigned sex did not correlate. I was called everything in the book – moffie, double-adaptor, bunny – coloured people always found ways to exploit the ambiguity and undecided nature of my gender identity. I heard these words everywhere, sometimes for no reason and other times in arguments. I would be walking down the street or having a conversation or in school and it would be casually thrown my way. Mocking my gender identity was something that gave coloured people who passed me power; it made them feel superior. When adults did it, it gave children the authority to do it – to break one another down with words and eventually their deeds. I was viewed as duplicitous, as someone who went about pretending to be someone they are not. They could not understand who I was, and they had no idea who I would become.

### **3.2 Religion<sup>26</sup>**

My family was always religious. Religion is a central component in the management of coloured people, especially my family's, lives. It was not something that fazed me. I felt coerced to join, instead of free to believe. My family used religion to bring them together, but also as a means to drive everyone apart (or just me). Because of my encounters with religion, its believers have always made me sceptical about it.

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<sup>26</sup> The chapter title was influenced by the song *Religion* by Lana Del Rey, who features heavily in my life.

Homosexuality, as proclaimed by every cis-hetero man based on their interpretation of the (Lord's) Word, was deemed a sin. Yes, I was attracted to men and I was effeminate from a very young age, but they misinterpreted who I wanted to go to bed with, with who I wanted to go to bed as. This is a common misinterpretation among Christian<sup>27</sup> people. The confusion between gender and sexuality was not only in culture, but in religion as well. My family made the same mistake. Through their religion they thought they could correct me.

Was I possessed by a demon? Did I need an exorcism? Was the demon a woman, or are all demons men? If the demon is a woman, was that the reason why I was effeminate? Was it the reason I was attracted to men? These are questions that still baffle me to this day. But for many coloured families, religion has always played a pivotal role in the reinforcing and maintenance of binary gender roles in society, especially through language.

Church on a Sunday was when all the grandchildren gathered at my grandmother's house to attend. I went along, not wanting to be ostracised, but I never felt like I was a part of the family or the congregation. I was the effeminate child, who dressed according to their emotions and grew their hair out. I was not like the other kids who probably did not, so publicly, question their gender or sexual identity. I was on my own.

One Sunday, I was perched next to my grandmother. For as long as I can remember, she was always a believer, and for her it was important that the rest of her family followed suit. She encouraged everyone to believe, but religion is not everyone's saviour. For my grandmother, her identity construction as a coloured Christian woman was based on, "distinctive religious, linguistic and class-based elements" (Adhikari 109). Religion can be detrimental. For as long as people are convinced that there is one true God, there has been condemnation, discrimination, and violence in His name. And I was their next victim. The perceived homosexuality I was demonstrating demanded correction in the eyes of everyone around me. This was the "slow death" of everyday structural violations based on my difference, and it has come at the intersections of race and religion" (Stacey Holman Jones and Anne Harris 33). Everyone was talking about my deviance to one another and never to me. But I was smart and socially aware. Being trans and coloured taught me that I should always be aware of discrimination – that I needed to remove religion from my definition of being.

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<sup>27</sup> Christianity comes with particular cultural messages that are 'explicit' and with the concept of redemption through the devotion to the faith (Gabrial 22). These messages are often in line with gendered European perspectives that construct a particular type of social awareness.

I sat next to her, silent. While the pastor was preaching, coloured women sought to silence their children. We had to pay attention in the same way that the adults were. Coloured children are often treated like adults by adults, who then in turn expect them to still be children. Yes, an obvious dilemma for children at any age, but it is context-specific. However, this context is also determined by adults.

Everyone was given a pamphlet that day. The pamphlet contained the events and notices for the week ahead. Every event was based on a specific social issue that went against the prescribed Word (of the Lord). Casually, I was browsing through the pamphlet, and not necessarily paying attention to the pastor or what I was reading.

On the pamphlet there was a workshop on sexuality – on homosexuality.

There, next to the workshop, was a name – the name they assigned to me. Placing *that* name next to the workshop was like a silent prayer.

She put that name there!

My grandmothers' inability to recognise who I was, acknowledges the ways in which particular doctrine is interpreted in order to create a particular type of lived reality. Framing my gender deviance as homosexual and needing correction speaks to the different levels of denying who I actually was. A common trend with queer and transgender individual's engagement with dominant society is the denial and erasure of the self through conformity (gender enslavement). Their religion forced me to disavow myself; that I was not good enough because of my queerness.

It was not my name, they may have used it to refer to me, but that was not my name. They did not know me, and I was just getting to know me. I wanted my own definition of what it meant to be transgender, coloured, and subsequently 'English'.

You just simply could not be

Coloured, Trans, Heterosexual *and* Christian. I knew who I was and what I needed to do.

Transitioning has become a spiritual journey for me, it is my religion, and it has allowed me to love myself again. It was me acknowledging and declaring who I was and not who they wanted me to be. And with this change, I found and took part in a language that is constructed just for me.

### 3.3 (In) Her Name<sup>28</sup>

I have discovered that there is a lot of different ways to be a woman.

For us transgender women, the focus of our be(com)ing usually stems from the correlation of our bodies to that of ciswomen and what types of procedures we have had.

I want to move beyond this correlation, beyond the surgery, and beyond genitalia.

I declare that “we are more than our bodies; we all have different relationships to our bodies; our bodies are ours to do what we want with” (Mock 172).

So much of my process of be(com)ing centres itself around socially understanding, constructing, and locating myself in my own womanhood. My process is about taking ownership of my life.

It is incumbent upon me to note that I find it hard to understand how people who are not transgender are making decisions for transgender people when they would never understand the experience.

Growing up, I too did not understand the difference between gender and sexuality. I was leaning on what was prescribed to me. For transgender women and queer individuals, it is often a return to “the experiences that have touched our becoming, including most powerfully home and family” that we then mould ourselves into the individuals we ought to be for ourselves (Jones and Harris 9). The purpose of the transgender autoethnography is to intelligibly solidify the lived experience that as a narrative disrupts and challenges dominant cultures of “apology, shame and fear” especially for those “who have been forgotten, lost, left behind, unacknowledged, hurt or silenced or worse” (Jones and Harris 9). In doing so, we create a type of visibility that publicly and socially accepts, reinforces, and integrates the lived experiences of transgender women.

After surviving the corrective attempts that were liberally handed out by the women and men in my family and society, I sought to find a space that would allow me to cultivate a different type of me – a new me. I needed a space that was far away from where I lived. A space where

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<sup>28</sup> The section title was inspired by the biblical phrase used during prayer by Christians, “In Jesus’ Name.” This phrase functions as a declaration of power and confidence. The title is changed not only because of the relationships between gender and religion, but it refers to the influence of a secular singer who constantly references religion in her music.

my difference could be visible through publicly naming who I am and performing my gender “with the understanding that public disclosure would not result in the curtailment of or loss of life” (Xavier Livermon 300). High school and university would become the experimental spaces in which I learnt about and recreated myself, for myself. There is the space where I came into my own and understood the difference between gender and sexuality through my discovering my own womanhood.

The name I had been assigned had always taken on the evolutionary tale that coloured identities were an amalgamation of different cultures and nationalities under colonialism and apartheid. The tale draws from the misconception that these cultures and nationalities were “pure” and not heterogenous (Adhikari 27). This misconception stemmed from essentialist interpretations that being coloured was “given and fixed” and failed to take “cognisance of fluidities and ambiguities inherent in the processes of coloured self-definition” (Adhikari 9). The name I assigned myself would be an amalgamation of experiences that were honest and true and influenced my own processes of self-definition.

When I was born, my mother told me that my grandmother named me and according to her these names were influenced by her religious beliefs. However, my surname, that is a different case. My surname is Ryklief, and in South Africa, most of the people who have the same surname are Muslim and not Christian. My grandmother married a man who was Muslim but stuck to her own faith. Because I never knew him, I never considered him my grandfather. My grandmother, my mother and her siblings then took on his surname, which she changed after remarrying. When I was born, I took on my mother’s surname and not my father’s.

I was born *in her name, my mother’s name*.

I was a light-skinned coloured child with a Christian name and Muslim surname. I kept the surname, just like my siblings who kept their mother’s. This broke with the code: that assigned male children were to take on their fathers’ surnames. Deborah Gabriel notes that as part of the assimilation to European cultural practices, “sons took on their fathers’ identity and that the history of the mothers should not be transferred over lightly” (8). My identity has always been a deviation from the norm. I was light skinned like my mother and my father was darker than us. I resemble my mother; it seemed like I was nothing like my father and that European cultural practices of naming were lost on me. For me:

There's power in naming yourself, in proclaiming to the world that this is who you are. Wielding this power is often a difficult step for many trans people because it's also a very visible one (Mock, 2014:144).

I first took issue with the way names were gendered. I expected people to understand that you could have a 'masculine' name and still be referred to using female pronouns. My assigned name was not necessarily unisex, but that's not how things worked in society. And I had to face the fact that I had to change my name. Changing my name would remove the emotional labour associated with educating people on how to correctly refer to me. Changing my name would also make it easier for people to not mess up and use the incorrect gender pronouns. Changing my name would allow people to better understand my womanhood.

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 2018, I received my new ID card with my name changed.

Elana Leah Ryklief

And with this change, I was coming into my own.

The name I chose for myself was based on one of the biggest musical influences in my life. I fell in love with her music. I was introduced to her by one of my best friends, Bella.<sup>29</sup> My first introduction to her music created an immediate addiction. I played the single that was sent to me by my friend on a beautiful sunny weekday morning – I was in grade 11 in 2012. Six years later, I submitted my application to alter my forenames which she inspired. I held on to the assigned initials EL and used the first letter of my assigned name and added my favourite singer's name.

*She is Lana Del Rey.*

Later that day, I downloaded her entire album. It became my comfort when I needed it most. She was someone who I introduced to everyone – my fellow queers, friends, lovers, family, and colleagues. She helped create me. It was through her writing that I found me.

*She is my daily obsession.*

*My drug intervention.*

*The green liquor on a bar shelf.*

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<sup>29</sup> I have decided to give all of my friends mentioned a (pseudo)name, by which only they can identify themselves.



*Life of the party,*

*Guiding whisper in the darkness.*

*Dope for the hopeless.*

For transgender individuals in South Africa, it is easier to start your social transition by changing your forenames as opposed to changing your gender marker. In my journey to becoming myself, I managed to change my forenames with ease. The reason I stated on the form was personal – that it is part of my transition and it would better support social acceptance and integration. There was no additional documentation required as with the process of changing your gender marker. It seems that government officials are more concerned with governing the gender binary and maintaining social control over the bodies of transgender individuals.

Socially transitioning for me required little medical or psychological approval to be accepted socially. My friends and peers readily agreed to acknowledging who I was and made the switch from my assigned name to Elana. It honestly is easy for some people, and some people (God knows why) find it harder to adapt to. They require an intellectual nudge, some form of gender correlation or legal, medical, or psychological approval. I did not give them the power to define and declare who I am. Do not give them this power. Not calling us by our real name, the name we give ourselves, does great psychological harm. It says to transgender individuals that who you are will not be acknowledged, accepted, and respected in a shared space. When you deadname<sup>30</sup> a transgender individual, it is a form of slow violence, as described by Rob Nixon, that occurs. Laverne Cox explains why deadnaming is such a traumatic experience for transgender individuals: “[T]he process of deadnaming is tied to a larger system of disavowing who we are on a fundamental level in terms of our gender identity... there’s the deep trauma that exists and the abuse that can actually happen when someone is deadnamed. Abuse is often attached to that, and violence to that” (Jake Viswanath 2019). The trauma is avoidable and unwarranted in most cases. The people in our lives ought to do better; they ought to do right by us.

I began to love myself. I love the name I had given this body.

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<sup>30</sup> The assigned name given to transgender individuals at birth. This is due to the notion that transgender individuals’ birth (give life to) themselves and the assigned individual dies out. The deadname often serves as a reminder of past traumas, experiences, and emotions. Cisgender individuals often deliberately refer to deadnames as a transgender individuals real name, using it as a tool to dehumanise, abuse and eradicate.

I was always a woman; I was always effeminate. It was not the reductive feeling of a woman in a man's body it was the conscious coming into my own womanhood. Being in a coloured community reminded me of the reductive train of thought most people deploy when dealing with difference, Don, a 45-year-old Samoan fa'afafine, notes about going back to Samoa, "Oh gosh, we're being reduced to a ... cock in a frock" (Roen 258). I always loved my body – I never thought I was born in the wrong body. Throughout my transition (becoming), socially and medically, I changed various things about myself to align my gender identity with who I truly was inside. For many people if transgender women "'pass' in their desired social gender – their appearance is taken to be proof of their biological sex" (Schilt and Westbrook 444). And I did not expect to pass, it all just happened. Aligning my body to what I deemed the necessary requirements for my womanhood was not me presenting proof of my biological sex; I was not focused on my biological sex; I was focused on me. For me being transgender means "not accepting the physical self (genitalia) as indicative of gender identity; instead, I view the body as malleable, or a text upon which I may inscribe an internalised sense of self" (Patricia Gagne and Richard Tewksbury 85).

And even though I loved the name I had given myself, it represented giving power to dominant society and practices of identification. I was conforming through changing my name. In Society "public presentations demanded conformity" (Gagne and Tewksbury 85). To me this seemed like "conformity or deviance [as] the only two possible subject positions in relation to normative gender" (Hausman 475). When I changed my name, I was conforming to alleviate the stress associated with being incorrectly identified. Being incorrectly identified not only became frustrating, but it also became infuriating because I was not being acknowledged for who I am. I had to conform to survive and not be killed off by society when I decided that who I was no longer existed. I had to change my name as part of a social silencing of someone who I was recognised as.

### 3.4 US

The strongest women in my life are simple women, who continuously navigate the complex social strata and overcome these challenges on their own. Being transgender requires strength, but my journey was not only influenced by ciswomen, but it is also influenced by other transgender women who I have come to know, love, and consider my family. These women,

who I have grown up with, transitioned and studied alongside, have all contributed to my success as a coloured trans woman.

Before attending Stellenbosch University or Universiteit Stellenbosch (US),<sup>31</sup> I did not know much of myself and my womanhood; I could never quite put it into words. The trans women who I transitioned alongside at university all contributed to my becoming in various ways.

Bella and I shared a passion for Lana del Rey's music, had an interest in mathematics and the sciences, and were considered the black sheep in our respective families. The night I met Bella set the tone for our entire relationship thereafter. I met her on one of the most difficult nights of her life – stranded, locked out in the cold on New Year's Eve. It was through this shared denigration that we faced from our family that we found an understanding. Not only did I see the severity of her situation, but I also recognised the severity of my own situation. I noticed that women often show strength, resilience and unity when facing adversity.

I met Ivy on my very first day at Stellenbosch University, when I moved into the university residence. It was an all-male residence. Something I immediately became aware of was that the entire house committee was all white. I turned to my mom and asked, "Am I making the right decision?" Ivy and I were the only coloured transgender women in the residence, but we were placed there because in 2014 there was no other option to self-identify other than male or female. I was lucky enough to have her placed in the section I was staying in. Because of our difference, this reassured me of my decision.

How did I feel? "I feel most coloured when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (Mock quoting Zora Neale Hurston 124). Stellenbosch University and the town was this background. Here I felt my colour. But it was the same for me being transgender in those residences; I felt most trans when I was the only transgender woman placed among cisgender individuals. Only then am I reminded of my transness.

In the context of contemporary South Africa and hegemonic values, many institutions are centred around privileged heteronormative values that are white, male and monied. Teresa Barnes notes in her work that "institutional cultures in modern, South African universities maintain the ability to produce and reproduce ways of knowing that privilege certain kinds of

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<sup>31</sup> Also known as Universiteit Stellenbosch (US) in Afrikaans, was the space in which I found my own womanhood and gender expression. The campus grounds were where I found women who look, spoke, and lived like me. This chapter is titled *US* to refer to the transgender women I met at Stellenbosch University and the University itself as the space where I began to love me.

maleness, and side-line and marginalise other ways of knowing and knowledge production” (2007:17). Although Barnes references institutions of knowledge production, with the influence of colonisation and knowledge distribution, universities play an important paradoxical role: they can reproduce dominant, heteronormative values but they can also be the origin of work that centres the resistant and emergent, coloured transgender woman’s experience in African. The work of Leslie Feinberg (1993) and Kate Bornstein (1994) “laid the foundations for the new transgender politics. For the first time, trans people were theorizing themselves for themselves” (Bettcher 384). This makes this research paper an important contribution to the existing research of the African woman’s experience.

Throughout my time in an all-male residence at university and high school, I visibly demonstrated my gender deviance and never conformed to the rigid masculinities that were being reproduced. My resistance came with resistance, but with me having the last word. I addressed bigoted, racist and queerphobic remarks directly. I never saw my race as a factor that would diminish my argument, because I had worked just as hard to claim the space and learn from it. Ivy and I explored our gender identity through clothing, makeup, straightening our hair, and socially changing perceptions on how to engage with young trans women. We were treated like women in an all-men’s residence.

Ivy and I have seen and been through it all. We were always seen together at the same parties, doing the same things, eventually studying the same undergraduate degree, and making the same friends. I took Lana Del Rey with me from high school to university. Ivy and I both shared a huge love for her music and we would always wail along to the high notes when listening to her music. She could sing and I could not, so I left it up to her to meet those notes. It was together that the foundations of my womanhood were coming together. Ivy and all the other women in my life taught me that it is important to have your voice heard, that things should not be left as they are, and that in life things do get better. We were always associated as a pair, but doing things together gave us safety and reinforcement. We received homophobic slurs because people assigned us as male, they assumed we were gay, and those who recognised our femininity thought we were lesbians. But I have always said, “If you can survive Stellenbosch, you can survive the world.”

Three years later, in my third year, I moved into a senior university residence. This was a space that took me away from the rigid masculinities that were being reproduced in Stellenbosch university single-sex residences. I was placed in a house with four other women. We were all

women of colour. It was here that I learnt about solidarity and how women continue to show strength, through love and mental health issues. University life was truly a dynamic experience where societies rules and regulations are extremely tangible. But in LLL (Live, Learn and Listen residence), I met some of the most amazing women who supported my becoming, corrected people who misgendered and deadnamed me, and most of all listened when I needed someone the most. We always sat in one another's rooms, watched *Game of Thrones*, *The Handmaids Tale* and *How to Get Away with Murder* together. These cisgender women of colour, who were my peers, showed me that womanhood is something we move into and recognise within our being. That my womanhood is a safe space where I understand myself.

It was also in LLL that I met another one of my best friends. I call her Whitney, because not only is she statuesque in the same way that Whitney Houston was, but we also always had a fabulous *patsy*<sup>32</sup> together to her songs. In LLL, Whitney and I always spoke indirectly, until we lived together. We formulated our sisterhood during a conversation at a friend's birthday party, not knowing that our conversations would become regular through the course of our friendship. It was through sharing our experiences and living together that I learnt about different transgender women's experiences that were not commercialised in media. It was in 2017 that I was exposed to women such as Janet Mock, Laverne Cox and Carmen Carrera who seem to set the tone for transgender excellence, passing and acceptance. It was also through living together with first Ivy and then Whitney that I learnt we as transgender women need to be there for one another and share our resources.

Whitney and I lived together the year after that, and it was in that year I learnt the most about myself. We started our hormone journey together. It was on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018 when I put on my first oestrogen patch and started my medical transition. Whitney started the month thereafter.

On March 21<sup>st</sup>, Whitney and I were off to celebrate the start of my medical transition at one of the local wine bars in Stellenbosch. We sat together in the early autumn sun, liberally indulging in a bottle of the wine bar's signature rosé. We sat together that afternoon and drank two bottles of wine. By the time we hit the second bottle, the combination of the autumn sun, the wine, and the oestrogen got to me. I prompted Whitney with a question:

Elana:            Does taking oestrogen make you a woman?

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<sup>32</sup> *Patsy*, referring to party in Cape queer lingo. Queer people often used female names as a replacement.

Whitney: Yes, it does! (She exclaimed, while laughing and swinging a glass of rosé)

Elana: No, it does not, bitch! Taking oestrogen does not make you a woman.

Was taking oestrogen a deciding factor in possessing a certain type of womanhood? Was it to exclude transgender women who are not on oestrogen? Oestrogen does not have the power to dictate the type of woman you become as a transgender woman. All women are different. Did Whitney know she was excluding herself or was she confident in knowing that she would definitely be starting hormones (which she did)? I then made an Instagram video that I posted during our celebratory drinks; the dialogue then questioned whether men would use hormones as a justification for womanhood.

Elana: “Hi everyone. Sitting here with Whitney thinking about hot guys, thinking: Why don’t they want us now that we’re taking oestrogen?”

Oestrogen was not going to define me; neither was a surgery. In South Africa, the easiest way to access hormones would be illegally, but in South Africa I did not have that access, so I consulted a general practitioner (GP) about starting hormones. There are not many GPs who offer this service and I managed to get an appointment with one in Cape Town who gradually placed me on the treatment. GPs are not often trained to treat transgender individuals based on the bias that exists within medicine. When you consult a GP for hormones, they do not require a letter from a psychologist that states you suffer from gender dysphoria or gender identity disorder. Being transgender is not a disorder and we should not have to consult a psychologist before HRT (or oestrogen supplementation as my GP called it). Whitney saw the same GP and so did many of my other friends; we became known as the ‘Stellenbosch girls’. Although gaining access to hormones was easy, it depended on me being financially savvy to afford the medication, doctor’s fee and blood work that was necessary.

It was alongside these women, who spoke so boldly of sexuality, heartbreak and difficulties of becoming, that I located my womanhood. At the beginning of summer that year, Whitney left for Thailand. She was heading over there to find a job teaching English. When she departed, I recognised that the friend who I had had so close to me that year was now thousands of kilometres away. She returned that December in 2018 and moved to the northern suburbs of Cape Town. She returned that summer with a love interest who then later became her husband. She was a transgender woman of colour from Cape Town who showed me that the lived experiences associated with cisgender heterosexuals are meant for women like us too. She was living a life most of us have only dreamed of. As transgender women we often internalise the

idea that we will live a life of solitude, sexual availability, and continued hustling. This idea of life was new to me.

However new things were, I always had my friend who I talked to and shared everything with. It is very important for a woman to have a best friend. When I started this master's degree in 2019, Whitney and my own becoming inspired the concept for this degree – problematising passing. Whitney was tall, thin, eloquent, dark-skinned and had curly hair – she passed. People viewed her as a woman, and this was something we would speak about in our morning phone calls. During our phone calls, we spoke about absolutely everything personal. Our daily conversations allowed me to iron out certain frustrations and consciously reflect on what was happening around me. Our conversations would last for hours. For me, “Our conversations raised my consciousness and pushed me toward owning my particular blackness (womanhood) in ways I never thanked them for” (Mock 167). Listening to these experiences forced me to examine my own womanhood and share it with those around me.

We still talk to this day, and our conversations are still as relevant as ever.

The conversations Whitney and I had were about the lived realities and how the intersections of our identity as transgender and our colour affect our lives. I am light-skinned, and this gives me a particular advantage in in life. I am not white, but I am coloured and being light-skinned brings me a little bit closer to that. It makes my skin colour acceptable, but I am transgender and a woman. The intersections of dominant culture would have me believe that I am inferior to cisgender women; however, I do not accept this. I am not cis, I am trans, but I am still a woman. Because it is my gender identity and not my sexuality that deviates, I am seen as inferior, with homosexuals, lesbians, bisexual, asexual, and pansexual being superior. My gender identity is viewed as less than my sexuality. Transgender women are not often viewed as heterosexual and therefore fall into the sexually deviant category. Not only am I transgender, I am a woman. I would be viewed as less than. Men have often assumed positions of superiority over women and because I am a woman and I no longer have the superiority that comes with the gender that was assigned to me.

My race, alongside being trans and a woman, was something that disempowered me, but being light-skinned empowered me. The colour of my skin, something I did not choose, was giving me an advantage. Colourism is “a form of skin colour stratification in which light-skinned people are privileged over dark-skinned people, in terms of access to education, work opportunities, and being perceived as attractive and possessing positive personality traits”



(Eugene Canotal ii). I was given access to education, work opportunities and perceived as attractive for a transgender woman.<sup>33</sup> This social skin stratification brings forth a divide between light- and dark-skinned coloured individuals. I am less likely to be stereotyped because of my skin colour than my gender or gender identity. Those positive personality traits are something I have to cultivate, to bring my civility and conduct as close to whiteness as possible. Through my education and work opportunities, I changed how I dressed, spoke, and engaged with individuals. Even though it was perceived that my colour was the only thing that privileged me, I am a woman, an attractive woman. I use this alongside my light skin as my superpower.

The women in my childhood, such as family, often followed cultural and religious interpretations when examining my gender deviance and met it with correction and resistance. However, the women who became my peers, colleges and best friends have all accepted my gender identity the same way the little kids who I played house with did not care if my genitalia matched my gender role in the game. Therefore, change will only occur if one advocates for difference, locally in your own family and then your community (Ryan Thoreson 646). Women have always influenced one another's becoming. We have given life to one another in ways that move beyond the parting of a cervix at birth. Transgender women formulate their womanhood in the conversations and experiences they have with other women. Socially and medically transitioning has enabled me to share these experiences with other women like me.

The stories of transgender women all over need to continue to be told, lauded, and recognised. Through the memories and stories told, the different forms of becoming and being can be recognised and understood in society. It is important that the narratives of transgender women are to be taken seriously for their own authenticity and not have it conform to the prescribed lived experience of transgender individuals in mainstream media and social myth. The diversity of womanhood should include transgender women based on the lived experience, feminine oppression under patriarchy, and the narratives of other women who form part of their journey.

The next chapter in this research paper will be a qualitative study that will continue to centre the narratives of transgender women through investigating their lived experience in relation to passing, access to healthcare services and social opportunity.

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<sup>33</sup> Refer to Chapter 1: "The Que(e)ry" – in the section of *My dreams (of women of colour) in colour* that speaks to how transgender women are complemented by men in society.



## **CHAPTER 4:**

### **“Women of their own experience: ‘In the Shoes of Another’”**

**Understanding the influence of race and the South African Constitution on transgender passing in Cape Town**

Our culture is intent on us not existing. Yet so many still chose to survive, and that looks different for each of us (Mock, 2017: xx).

Transgender women have always held the precarious position of social outcast due to the many intersections of their identity. Yet, for some transgender women there is hope and promise that their lived experience will be void of discrimination and on par with the rest of (ci)society, if they manage to be assumed as cis. Every experience is different, and every experience deserves to be heard.

This chapter will reflect on the lives of transgender women of colour in Cape Town. This chapter will also attempt to demonstrate how a marginal group in society acquires values and standardised representation practices of cisgender women to represent their own womanhood. The scope of this research contributes to the discussion on queer women's lives, specifically queer women who are transgender, who by means of passing form part of mainstream culture and/or successfully (re)present as their assigned (cis)gender counterpart.

This chapter<sup>34</sup> will also posit that passing in effect does not positively contribute to the lives of transgender women and their community due to it being an unattainable standard set forth by a capitalistic society and that their race, being coloured (in combination with the racial history in South Africa), affects their lived experience. It will also aim to critique the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, and the access to health and psychological services and provide suitable suggestions for identity verification. This then illustrates the ways in which access for transgender women can be improved and how laws can improve the social integration of transgender women.

Finding the starting point to discuss this transgender social phenomenon meant having to explore aspects of the community that are not easily accessible and/or unseen to the rest of

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<sup>34</sup> The reference included in the title Women of their own experience: “*In the Shoes of Another*”. from *POSE*, s2:e10, “In My Heels”. Elektra Wintour (Then Abundance: See Chapter 2 for character reference) explains the purpose of the newly announced category “Butch queen in drag: First time at a ball.” The title makes use of the metaphor that speaks to experiencing or understanding the experiences of another by walking in their shoes.

This metaphor extends to the central theme of this master’s thesis, that the narratives of transgender women must be narrated, critiqued, and distributed by transgender women of colour and that our stories be told, acknowledging the diverse forms of becoming for every woman.

Placing yourself ‘in the shoes of another’ allows us to understand the experiences of one another and recognise the complexities of their lived experience and how it has affected the true nature of their becoming.

society. Hence, the starting point of my research makes use of information that is both seen and unseen to cisgender individuals.

\*\* I stumbled upon the concept of passing within the transgender community when I began my journey towards realising myself and my own womanhood. This concept has a problematic history that advantages some and not all. This concept features as a defining requirement for transgender individuals to function in society. Within the queer community, passing finds itself manifested in various forms, with transgender women displaying the most variations. These variations consequently extend to the multiplicity of womanhood. It was one night in the drag-owned club in Cape Town called Bubbles, where I performed my first drag song at age 17: “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” by Cyndi Lauper. Here I encountered the terms, passing and realness. It was when the top drag performer Manila Von Teez told me that I was serving realness. What she meant was that I looked like a woman. I was new to this and felt like a woman, not because I had dressed up as one but because I was one. I dabbled in the practice of drag as a means to subvert gender in order to find myself, but ultimately it was crossing off different definitions of the self that did not seem to accurately describe who I was. It was a steppingstone to finding out who I truly was.

Passing<sup>35</sup> – as described by drag queens in *Paris is Burning* – is the ability to represent (as a queer body) the authenticity of heterosexual (read cisgender) standards in society based on their vocation. This representation is heavily characterised by the standards iterated by cisgender individuals in society. As time progresses these standards have solidified and found themselves as part of the ballroom culture – a culture of inclusivity that mimics and alters cisgender standards of belonging and representation. In this way the mimetic nature of the ballroom culture often stereotypes cisgender individuals and utilises it to pose as their counterparts. In Cape Town it was not the ballroom scene exactly; it was and still is mostly white gay bars in Greenpoint that have drag artists perform as a means to demonstrate inclusivity. Certain clubs then took on the role of being the main house of drag shows in town. It started off with Rosie’s, then Bubbles and then Zer021. The first two closed down and the last one is still well known in Canterbury Street in Cape Town and regularly features drag queens from local and international shows.

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<sup>35</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 subsection “The Realness...” For Dorian Corey’s definition of realness and its influence on and the construction of passing.

When queer individuals take on these stereotypes, they are actively queering cisgender aesthetics and in return making it their own – and this is what I did with my participation and took as a lesson with me that my representation is my own and I can merge whatever I so choose. Merging parts of what society gives me allows me to actively create the person I want to be. I can incorporate, change and exclude whatever I want. And this is my power.       \*\*

Passing in the transgender community had (or still has) a volatile history, with it existing as a selective privilege and almost unattainable for most. The unattainable nature of passing depends on various external factors. However, genetics and race play into how well a transgender person passes in the initial stages of their representation. The influence of medicine and wealth comes at a later stage to (finalise?) their representation. This volatile history places emphasis on the social standards of beauty assigned to cisgender women that in return imposes these various social, political, and economic realities on/in the lives of transgender women. The social context in which the concept of passing features relates to how most women in Western cultures experience their passing privilege and often the experiences of women in Third world countries are then set aside and/or relegated to the margins of transgender narratives.

The lived experiences of transgender women in Cape Town, South Africa echo many of the concepts that are explored in Western academic sectors; however, they are demonstrated in a different socio-political context with different economic and professional determiners. This study aims to breach the gap that exists when exploring the social and literary forms of becoming that transgender women undertake. Focus will be placed on how transgender women of colour define passing in their own terms and its requirements in society. This allows us to get an accurate account of the existing interpretations of passing. Furthering the focus, the experiences of medical and psychological access will be assessed in relation to the experiences of the participants and how their representations have been aided by it. The final focus will aim to demonstrate how the Constitution of South Africa can improve the access transgender people have according to the existing Act.

#### **4.1 Research problem**

For coloured transgender women in South Africa, passing<sup>36</sup> is dependent on socio-economic and racial influences that create varying degrees of privilege that adversely affect them and their community. This privilege allows transgender women in Cape Town to access medical, psychological, and legal services that are still based on Western regulations that are evidently invasive in their methodologies applied to bodies that cross gender.

The lived experience and societal norms of all South Africans post-apartheid is still to this day affected by race and gender. This effect in return influences the ways in which privilege is assigned to transgender women based on their race and how easily they have attained the gender norms of cis women. Transgender women experience discrimination based on their proximity to heterosexuality, whiteness, and masculinity in their everyday lives. Recognising the intersections of gender deviation, race and socio-economic status, transgender women are predisposed to discrimination and finding themselves positioned farther away from heterosexuality, whiteness, and masculinity. It is also noted that the combined stigmas (intersectional oppressions) transgender women of colour face places them “in a burdensome situation for an already vulnerable population, which could in turn compromise their health and human rights” (Marais Wilson et al. 1). In this hierarchy of privilege and discrimination, transgender women are in the bottom tier with the least privilege and most discrimination. However, this changes when race, gender conformity and socio-economic status is improved. Passing can be seen as this change that occurs.

## 4.2 Research question

Does the race and socio-economic status of a transgender woman affect the way she passes, the access and privilege she attains, and does this come at any cost to the community or herself?

This question shows the relationship between the socio-economic circumstances in passing and the social cost that it comes at. The way the circumstance affects the cost is based on the successful acquisition of cis aesthetics.

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<sup>36</sup> For this study, the use of the word passing will simplify the complexity associated with the emerging use of cis assumed (Which in my opinion is correct). However, to ground the study in existing and emerging literature both will be discussed. The term can be found in Chapter 1 and is used by one participant in the interview results below.

### **4.3 Hypothesis / research statement**

Passing creates varying degrees of privilege that affect not only the transgender woman, but the transgender community in Cape Town. These degrees of privilege are influenced by socio-economic status and race. The medical, legal, and psychological requirements for transgender women ultimately limit the amount of access given and remains offensive, invasive, and unattainable by Western and not African regulations.

### **4.4 Aims and objectives**

1. Elicit what the physical requirements for transgender passing in Cape Town are.
  - 1.1 To determine if there are underlying influences that control the physical requirements for transgender passing.
  - 1.2 To determine how these requirements affect the lives of transgender women and their representation.
2. Evaluate the access to medical, psychological, and legal services.
  - 2.1 To demonstrate that access to these services is hard to obtain and scarce.
  - 2.2 To place emphasis on the need for better access to these services.
3. Determine the current social climate of the transgender community.
  - 3.1 To assess the social and personal pressures transgender women experience.
  - 3.2 To reflect on the ways social status is created.
4. Assess the ways in which race/colourism affects transgender passing.
  - 4.1 To forecast the influence of race in transgender passing as an access inhibitor.
  - 4.2 To illustrate that race plays an important role in managing access.

## 4.5 Methodological approach

This qualitative study aims to provide insight into the lived experiences of transgender women in Cape Town, South Africa. This study will further aim to give localised insight into the requirements, motivations and opinions of transgender women and their experience with passing and its influence on their community.

Conducting interviews allows for a personal account of the experience of a transgender woman to be noted. Mary Gergen states that “interviews become sites for persons telling their stories to emphatic listeners whose projects were frames as having both personal and political emancipatory potential” (2001). The effect of retelling your story allows for the increased liberation of transgender individuals in public, political and literary spaces.

An approach that would be most beneficial to evaluating this qualitative study is the narrative approach. The narrative approach ensures that the results obtained are woven together in a sequence of events, themes, or stories. The use of the narrative “is presented as a framework for understanding the subject and interview data in qualitative work” (Margarete Sandelowski 161). This approach merges the use of literature, articles read, and the integration of queer, intersectional and trans theory to bolster the lived experiences that are contributing to understanding passing as a concept. These in return highlight the realities and the complexities of this concept’s application and its functioning.

As part of the qualitative approach, I include my own narrative (experiences) alongside the participants selected for the study. The purpose of this is to correlate the lived experiences of others to my own. I reflect on my own experience with the requirements of passing, its effects on the community, and the amount of access I gained because I pass in a specific way in relation to my race and experiencing colour in Cape Town. There is a merging of my personal reflections alongside the perspectives of the participants to create holistic perspective. This will allow a sixth opinion (my own) to be given on the issues transgender women face in Cape Town.

The qualitative research serves to comment on the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, as well as the name amendment success rate of transgender women in Cape Town, South Africa. These comments are based on the qualitative research obtained as

to how many people have access to these services and how easy or difficult this access/service is obtained.

The participants in the interview have some initial information and experience on the topic of passing as they identify as transgender women of colour. During the interview process, the interview questions are used to guide a specific conversation surrounding the experiences of transgender women in Cape Town in relation to their race and requirements, access, and communal/personal tensions. These are the three thematic groups used to later analyse the responses given. The interview process starts with open-ended questions about the experience the trans woman has had with the concept of passing, their medical/psychological/ legal access, and their experience in the community. The skills needed for this are to establish a rapport and to provide a sound and attentive environment for the interview to take place.

#### Interview Structure:

1. Introduction to the research, the consent form, an explanation of the terms and the interview process. The interview process will be recorded and saved digitally.
2. Introduction of the participant – their name (optional), age, profession, and race.
3. Interview questions are asked and the participants respond to them.
4. Conclusion – interview ends, transcription of the interview and information of support services offered.

The analysis of the interview responses to the questions is done using a thematic linking technique, that seeks to elaborate on similarities and highlight differences to maintain the specificity and integrity of the narrative provided. Anderson and Kirkpatrick note that “the challenge for the analyst would be to present enough of the data that the line of argument and interpretation are convincing while situating the findings in appropriate theoretical and research literature” (2015:3). The analysis of the narratives provided should be grouped accordingly to substantiate and validate the argument set forth by the research conducted. This done with appropriate theoretical and research literature ensures that the argument produced contributes to an existing theoretical body of literature on the topic. The analysis of the responses will also make use of how and what language is used in the participant responses and why. What was the tone and atmosphere put forth in the interview and how does that affect the study? What literary devices are put forth by the participants and what is its significance?



## **4.6 Participant selection criteria**

The sample size for the interview is five participants.

This ensures a minimum variability to give an opinion on the lives of transgender women in South Africa and specifically in Cape Town. This number of interviewees is suggested to be an adequate amount based on a pre-selected criterion and was chosen based on Glaser and Strauss recommendation that the appropriate way would be choose a number that would not exceed the saturation of participants needed for rich, ground-breaking content (1967). Five participants is be sufficient to obtain an acceptable amount of data to satisfy the questions asked and the social phenomenon of passing that is being explored. Adding more participants would lead to the research being overly saturated and thereby not contributing to anything different to the perspective. Not using a larger sampling size would erase the possibility of repeating content. The narrative approach that is used to analyse the responses makes use of a small sampling group that does not allow for any generalisations to be made because of its specificity.

The criteria set for the study is that the participant identifies as a transgender woman, has experienced discrimination for their race, gender identity/representation, and has experienced some legal, social or medical gender-altering systems as well as being a part of the transgender community. Coloured transgender women are focused on specifically because their narratives have been under-researched in South Africa and globally compared to the narratives of white or passable trans women. I also focus on coloured transgender women to highlight their narrative and my own.

## **4.7 Participant Recruitment**

The participants chosen for this study would be recruited via direct message via my personal social media networks (WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook). Because marginalised groups formulate their own communities, some of these participants are some of my best friends, Facebook friends or Instagram followers. This provides me with a direct link and access to their experiences, because of the personalised and established relationship that exists. Due to this, I was able to send them a personal direct message to find out whether or not they would

be interested in participating in the study. The participants approached were selected based on my prior knowledge of some of their experiences. When they agreed to participate, they provided me with an email address and I emailed them to clarify the nature and purpose of the study. I also shared what would be required of them and attached the interview questions along with a consent form.

Because the transgender women approached are direct social media links, friends and acquaintances, those excluded are transgender women that I do not know and who form part of other communities in Cape Town that might not have the same privileged experience. These might include transgender women who have not had any or some access to medical, legal, or psychological services in order to transition. They would also exclude the experiences of transgender women who are white in society, because race is a central feature in the discussion on transgender passing. This runs the potential risk of not giving an accurate account of the discrimination and experiences faced by trans women.

#### **4.8 Ethics**

When the lived experiences of transgender women are relayed, it has often not been by transgender women themselves. Alongside the limited understanding of transgender women, this has often resulted in negative consequences for the community and the person.

The qualitative research on transgender women done in Cape Town will contribute positively to the understanding of transgender women as well as the everyday challenges they face with representation and how that is experienced. By centring the lived experience of transgender women, I maintain that the rights, dignity, safety, and wellbeing of the participants will always be safeguarded, as stipulated by the Stellenbosch University Research Ethics Committee (REC). The protection of the participants' identity is of the utmost importance to the research and pseudonyms as well as the option to be anonymous and referred to as 'participant' was given.

For the ethical purposes of this research, Adams et al, notes that 'language and the framing of research should be non-stigmatizing and the research should be disseminated back to the community' (168). Adams et al continues to note that "the diversity of the community should be accurately and sensitively reflected, displaying a nuanced awareness of all the social,

medical and legal issues that the transgender community might experience (2017:172). Being transgender, and incorporating my own narrative, I hope to uphold all of the ethical practices presented in order to represent the transgender community accurately and sensitively. I am aware that placing specific focus on coloured transgender women needs to be dealt with sensitively as it is a highly contested and controversial category. Therefore, it is important to steer away from generalisations and produce work that can be of use to the transgender community.

Psychological support was provided, due to the medium risk level of the minority experience being analysed. Because the questions are based on reflecting the participants' experience with institutional access, community and personal tensions and the social requirements for being transgender, some psychological discomfort may occur when the participant is asked to reflect on these things. The participants were also asked to reflect on their experiences with race and how this has affected the way they pass and what access this has given them.

#### **4.9 Interview results**

This section of the chapter will discuss the interview results that were obtained from the participants. The participants were all interviewed privately in a location of their preference and cannot therefore be disclosed. The interview process took less than thirty minutes with the aim of the interview and consent form being explained as well as completing six questions that answer the primary question posed by reading the research problem. The interview questions aim to address the aims and objectives of the research study in relation to the lived experience of transgender women of colour in Cape Town.

The interviews are discussed in relation to three thematic categories that draw focus to the specific socio-political realities of the transgender lived experience. These categories cover the six questions asked to address the questions. The interview transcripts have aided in the construction and exploration of these categories which emerged during the analysis. These thematic categories focus on the influence of race on and the requirements of passing, the access to trans-related services it provides, and finally the communal-personal tensions that exist because of the concept. The six questions answered are grouped into these thematic categories in order to bring forth the specificity and diversity of every lived experience

represented. The thematic categories were chosen to depict the lived experiences of transgender women in an unbiased manner, without interpretation and in a logical fashion in order to maintain ethical standards.

The questions given to the participants during the interview are open-ended and allow the reader to freely give their opinion that goes in hand with the methodology of the qualitative approach.

A short profile of the participants:

**Avalon Keys**, a 25-year-old trans woman who studied at Stellenbosch University for four years and now works as an online English language instructor at iTutor in Uitenhage, Eastern Cape. She started her transition two years ago through the private healthcare system.

**Vivienne Evans**, a 26-year-old trans woman who studied at Stellenbosch University and now lives in Belgium with her (Caucasian) husband. She used to be an online English language instructor in Cape Town. She is previously from Clanwilliam, a town close to Cape Town, and started her transition two years ago through the private healthcare system.

**Don Maisel**, a 24-year-old medical student at the University of Cape Town, who identifies as coloured and started her transition through the public system three years ago.

**Cher Petersen**, is a 26-year-old trans woman who was a journalism student at the Stellenbosch University. She now interns at *Drum/You* magazine and lives in Cape Town. She started her transition three years ago through the private healthcare system.

**Romy Johannes**, a 27-year-old trans woman who lives in Durbanville, South Africa and works at Zara. She started transitioning six months ago through the public healthcare system.

**Elana Leah Ryklief**, I am a 25-year-old transgender woman born and raised in Cape Town, completing my master's degree at Stellenbosch University and working as the Outgoing Exchange Coordinator at Stellenbosch University International. I live in Stellenbosch and started my transition two years ago through the private healthcare system and moved to the public healthcare system.

All interview responses are saved as appendices at the end of this research paper.

#### 4.10 Results analysis/discussion

An interview assessing the lives of transgender women in terms of service access, race and social tensions has not been done on a large scale to create social change. This interview focuses on the previously mentioned terms to give a glimpse into the status of them. The results of the participants have all been thematically grouped based on the six asked. The thematic grouping goes with the narrative approach to assess the answers provided. All these answers are woven together to give a specific storyline that demonstrates the effects and requirements of passing, the access it provides, and the tensions transgender women experience. The narrative approach will also bring to light the unseen complexities of existing as a trans body through the intersections of race, gender, and socio-economic status.

The results have been grouped into three groups:

1. The influence of race and the requirements of passing
2. Access to trans-related services
3. Communal personal tensions.

The results will then be discussed in these categories linking experiences, assessing the effects, and focusing on language used. For qualitative research, the sample group of five participants allowed me to gather unheard information regarding their experiences. Some of the participants have given lengthy responses with details that can be useful for other transgender women, while others have kept their responses concise and relatable. It proved most useful to use a small group of participants with the narrative approach to discuss the effects of passing on transgender women of colour's lives.

#### **4.11 Principal findings**

For the first thematic group, **Influence of race and the requirements of passing**, we can see that there are similar social experiences that expose how race has affected their ability to pass, the access acquired, and what requirements the participants identify in order to pass.

The requirements for passing or being assumed/viewed as cisgender is rooted in the very requirements given for cisgender individuals.<sup>37</sup> These requirements are often informed by mass media that distribute images of the desired gender and its representation. As stated by Avalon Keys, the “standards for passing also go above and beyond the standards that cis women follow” (Appendix 2). In addition to this, it is often exaggerated and over-prescribed to transgender women. Prior to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the acknowledgement of diversity, the requirements given were based on what was prescribed to white women – their hair, body, face, shoes, behaviour, and sex appeal.

This proves that representation for transgender women should not only focus on HRT and gender reassignment surgery (GRS) but also includes social things such as hair, body and facial structure, clothing, makeup, and behaviour. Avalon Keys’ statement demonstrates the way transgender women are held to cisgender women’s standards: “Society holds various standards for passing, and many of these are rooted in classist and racist ideals of beauty: a petite or curvy body is a must, anything in-between calls into question one's authenticity in performing womanhood. This affects not only trans women, but cis women too (i.e. the notion of being ‘built like a man’)” (Appendix 2). The standards for transgender women are exaggerated and unequally applied and anything that does not conform to it is not an accurate portrayal of womanhood. Women are often told to manage their body shape and weight. If a woman’s body structure resembles that of a man – broad shoulders, prominent masculine facial features (brow bone, jawline, and short hair) – she would then be viewed as a man and ridiculed for it. “Trans women must always be presentable, never have a strand of facial hair, a light and airy voice, beautiful makeup but ‘not drag queen makeup’, and walk in heels better than cis women. If these seem arbitrary and nonsensical, that is because these standards are exactly that.” (Appendix 2). The balance between conforming to societies representation standards and your own can be quite difficult to attain because of how strict the former can be. “The requirements for trans and cis women in society are not the same. This creates different degrees of acceptance based on your face, hair, clothes, body structure, shoes, and social behaviour. For all these things must be closely aligned with the requirements given to ciswomen – clear skin, no facial hair, small body etc. Transgender women are not supposed to look too manly or have any manly features but cannot be overly feminine or it would deem them invalid.” (Appendix 7). Transgender women therefore experience the social burden to conform in order to be accepted

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<sup>37</sup> Refer to Chapter 2 for contextual examples from *Paris is Burning* on the cisgender standards of representation and the influence of realness in the construction of the passing requirements.

and recognised, but also denying themselves and their bodies which leads to gender dysphoria and body dysmorphia. This results in transgender women being hyperaware of their representation in society and the anxiety associated with the societal gaze. Focusing entirely on phenotypical changes to gender, we can see that transgender women are held to the standards for cisgender women.

The representation standards are also unattainable to many transgender women because of financial circumstances. Most of the requirements mentioned require some form of financial aid to be attained and maintained. None of the participants view GRS as a requirement for passing; this could be because the genitals remain largely concealed during public (re)presentation. Don Maisel recognises that the representation of each woman varies, and femininity is not expressed uniformly by all women: “However, there are many different phenotypes of gender. Not all women are going to perform gender in the same way. I do not think as a trans women you [don’t] have to tick all these boxes of femininity because this is unrealistic.” (Appendix 4). The assigned gender representation standards for women is viewed as homogenous and is often prescribed by a dominant culture. Transgender women all (re)present themselves differently in society and this defines femininity as heterogenous and attainable outside of dominant culture. This heterogeneity allows us to change the definitions of what we know as beautiful.

With a shift in focus to the physical, and not the physiological aspects of the trans woman’s representation, Roen notes that “[s]ome transpeople also seek to challenge medical approaches to transsexuality on the basis that these approaches represent a violation of cultural values and beliefs about the relationship between sexed embodiment and lived gender” (255). Not all transgender women seek to change their body with medical intervention, and the focus on physical attributes allows the change of gender to still occur without violating any cultural or personal ideologies. Romy Johannes focuses on the fact that as transgender women they “would groom” themselves, focusing on the beautification aspect of gender performance, thus, agreeing with the hypothesis statement that these (often Western) requirements remain financially limiting, invasive, and unattainable at best. Western beauty standards and procedures play a particular role in the materialisation of the self. For transgender women, without this the world would cease to integrate and understand individual gender expression.

With the history of South Africa, race plays an important part in the management of access and the degree of passing transgender women of colour experience. Racial appearance and descent

played a role in the process of racial classification during apartheid. The irrational racial descriptions, strongly determined by appearance” (Maureen Mswela and Melodie Labuschaigne 26). Colourism sharply increased as a new form of racial discrimination because clear-cut racial categories ended with the end of apartheid and this was too obvious to use in post-apartheid South Africa. “Being coloured and light-skinned allows transgender women to specifically place themselves on the spectrum from blackness to whiteness, giving them access and advantage that they would not normally have. Avalon Keys notes that colourism hierarchal when it comes to access: “As a light-skinned coloured woman, I have most certainly been afforded material and social privileges that my black counterparts simply do not get” (Appendix 2). This access provides transgender women of colour with safety in society, minimises them as a threat based on their proximity to whiteness, and distances them from the social stereotypes of black women. This response provides a direct link between the standards and requirements of passing and whiteness; it also demonstrates that race (skin colour) has greatly affected the lived experience due to the specific positioning (advantage) it gives her in relation to whiteness and blackness. This is echoed in my experience of colourism. “Being light-skinned in South Africa has given me some advantage over other cis and trans individuals. Because of my proximity to whiteness I am deemed as no threat, somewhat competent, and my voice is heard more often than other trans women. This proximity allows me to be viewed as attractive and privileged in some contexts. It has given me access to predominantly white spaces in education, employment, and social groups” (Appendix 7). Vivienne Evans notes that the colour of her skin exoticises her as a transgender woman of colour and this, coupled with her ability to pass, means she is viewed as a beautiful woman. “Mixing my exotic features with my ability to pass contributes to being seen as a beautiful woman, which then also grants me pretty privilege. Thus, due to the fact that I pass, mixed with not completely being dark skinned, I am seen as more desirable. In these ways, my skin tone has indeed affected my degree of passing.” (Appendix 3). Pretty Privilege is the advantage being beautiful gives you in society. If you are beautiful, you are deemed more attractive and desirable. Race therefore plays an important role in locating a transgender woman in society as either attractive and acceptable or deviant and seen as a threat.

For Don Maisel, the influence of being light-skinned and the effects of colourism/racism allows her to pass as cisgender based on her proximity to whiteness: “The theory around this means that being darker means being less attractive, manly or ugly, but as a light-skinned person I am not assumed to be those things” (Appendix 4). The effect of colourism removes or distances



transgender women from masculinity and assigns a degree of beauty. Often the anthesis is assigned to transgender women who do not pass – they are viewed as ugly, or monstrous, manly, vulgar or predators. For Don, being light-skinned means that she has not been “disadvantaged in any way because I pass based on South Africa’s racial context and history as well as anti-blackness amongst coloured people” (Appendix 4). South Africa’s colour and racial history of segregation and discrimination is best illustrated in the repealed apartheid laws and regulations that has significantly affected the coloured and African communities (Mswela and Labuschaigne, 2013:5). These laws have significantly affected interracial relations among the members of the black community and affected the way transgender women are viewed based on the colour of their skin. Certain ideologies remain and centre themselves in many institutional practices and spill over into the fabric of society. Cher Petersen notes that she faces more discrimination of her “own race and people of other races” than white people. It begs the question, do white people accept or tolerate transgender people of colour better than other races? The statements by the participants reinforce the notion that race plays a crucial role in a transgender woman’s ability to pass only if they are medium- to light-skinned. The varying degrees of colour the transgender women of colour are mirror the varying degrees of privilege and access in society. Based on the participant sample size, none of the participants felt that their race has disadvantaged them in anyway because of the benefits of being light-skinned.

The second section, **Access to trans-related services**, interrogates the level of access to medical, legal, and psychological services that transgender women in Cape Town have experienced. These services allow transgender women to self-actualise and be recognised in society with proper support from institutions and professionals. The two questions posed aid us in evaluating access, demonstrating how scarce and hard these services are to obtain, and I place emphasis on the need for accessible, sensitive, and safe services.

There are several themes found in the participants’ responses, many of them acknowledging that starting their transition and accessing these services is expensive and difficult, with some participants having a good experience with professionals and others not. Avalon Keys notes that “accessing gender-affirming medical care is outrageously expensive and notoriously difficult” and she “essentially bankrupt[ed] herself by seeing a specialist” when she started. Vivienne Evans notes that transgender women first need to be employed or have some form of financial aid: “Medically transitioning is very expensive and because I was an independent, educated and employed trans-woman of colour, the costs associated with hormones was a no-brainer for me. I saw it as a long-awaited gift to myself from myself” (Appendix 3). Here, the

participant notes some of the factors that gave her access to HRT and potentially what all transgender women of colour need – to be independent, educated, and passable. Many transgender women do the work of researching the access to these services themselves as indicated by Vivienne Evans and Cher Petersen. Cher also notes in her response that the costs associated with transitioning is something transgender women of colour have to accept and adhere to: “It is quite expensive, but it is what one needs to transition” (Appendix 5). Accessing medical, psychological, and legal services is expensive and scarce, with most of the participants, except Romy and Don, accessing it privately. And even though it is expensive, the participants note that it is the best decision they have made. The excessive costs associated to these services makes it inaccessible to transgender women who are not employed, supported by their family, or by the state. Often transgender women who fund their own access to these services just accept the costs as a consequence associated to transitioning and then bankrupt themselves in the process.

For transgender women who do not have the financial capabilities to fund their transition, government assistance is not nationally provided (only in major cities) and NGOs take on the role of providing localised, free, gender-affirming services. Avalon Keys notes that Groote Schuur Hospital is the only institution that benefits from government assistance and organisations such as “WITS RHI, in connection with USAID, are trying to provide these services all over the country for free” (Appendix 2). In the journal, *Izindaba*, there was only two public sector hospitals in South Africa that catered to transgender health (Chris Bateman, 2011:91). She also notes that medical aid in South Africa does not cover any HRT costs – doctors’ consultations, blood work, medication and traveling. One of the benefits of accessing private healthcare is skipping lengthy institutional requirements and lines as noted by Vivienne Evans. Don Maisel and Cher Petersen both have been put in contact to these services by NGOs. For Don, “I had to see a psychiatrist and then a waiting list for the endocrinologist. This whole process took about a year. It took 4 months before receiving hormones after the consultation. Many people wait much longer for these services” (Appendix 4). With this referral, all the participants, having gone private and public has shared information and resources in order to access these services. For myself, “I skipped the ‘absurd’ requirement for psychological evaluation before taking hormone therapy and started my medical transition privately” (Appendix 7). This allowed me to get early access to hormone treatment without being evaluated by medical professionals based on my decision to transition.

Vivienne also notes that it was important for her to find a trans-friendly doctor to assist with her medical transition. For transgender women, it is important to find a doctor that is knowledgeable and sensitive to your medical transition. This is the second theme that comes through in the responses. Avalon Keys had the opposite experience, where it got to the point that her GP was absolutely clueless about transitioning medically, to the point where she “had to educate her” (Appendix 2). Often GPs do not have sufficient knowledge and are often inexperienced on the issues of transgender healthcare and HRT. Accessing trans-friendly services is important in providing professional and inclusive experience for transgender women. Romy Johannes notes how important professional, supportive and inclusive services are in her response to the question: “I feel welcomed when I go to my doctor and that I am in a safe space when going to him to get my check ups and hormones and he would always ask how the process is going and as a patient it makes me feel good that my doctor is interested in how I am and the process of me becoming my true self” (Appendix 6). This lack of/limited knowledge in their education, training and work experience creates a shortage of healthcare practitioners that can cater to the needs of transgender women. Institutions and practitioners should advocate for increased knowledge in their education, training, and work experience to include transgender health in both the public and private sector. The inclusion of transgender women (read as minorities) will allow governing bodies to create greater social acceptance and inclusion.

If transgender women cannot access medical and psychological services, they cannot alter their sex description on their legal documents because it requires professional intervention and confirmation. However, transgender women can change their name without needing to access any of those services.

\*\* I cannot stress enough, the importance of a name.

It is how we address and call out to someone.

It is inextricably linked to our identity, gender and who we are as people.

It is the acknowledgement and recognition of an individual.

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The second question in this subsection focuses on the effect legislation has on the recognition and self-actualisation of transgender women of colour. The legislation in question is the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003. The current requirement for transgender women to change their sex description and sex status from Male (M) to Female

(F) is as follows: “Any person whose sexual characteristics have been altered by surgical or medical treatment or by evolvment through natural development resulting in gender reassignment... may apply” (Government Gazette 3). This requirement is applied differently to trans and intersex individuals.

For trans individuals the first requirement is “in the case of a person whose sexual characteristics have been altered by surgical or medical treatment resulting in gender reassignment be accompanied by reports stating the nature and results of any procedures carried out and any treatment applied prepared by the medical practitioners who carried out the procedures and applied the treatment or by a medical practitioner with experience in the carrying out of such procedures and the application of such treatment.” The second requirement is a medical report that supports the first one: “in every case in which sexual characteristics have been altered resulting in gender reassignment, be accompanied by a report prepared by a medical practitioner other than the one completed in paragraph (b) who has medically examined the applicant in order to establish his or her sexual characteristics” (Government Gazette 4).

This requires transgender women to see two different medical practitioners to obtain these two letters. The requirements of this act are invasive to transgender women because intimate parts of their bodies need to be assessed by a medical practitioner who is a stranger to them. The requirements are also difficult to attain due to the expense of seeing two different medical practitioners as opposed to one. The Act mentions that the report can be carried out by a practitioner that has experience in the application and procedures of transgender health; however, due to the lack of knowledge and education present in general, this makes it difficult for trans people to find these services.

Often the requirements for intersex individuals are applied to trans individuals. Intersex individuals according to the act must provide “a report prepared by a medical practitioner corroborating that the applicant is intersexed” and “a report prepared by a qualified psychologist or social worker corroborating that the applicant is living and has lived stably and satisfactorily for an unbroken period of at least two years, in the gender role corresponding to the sex description under which he or she seeks to be registered” (Government Gazette 4). The requirements here are not only physically invasive, but psychologically too. Because gender is viewed as a fixed construct in society, intersex individuals must prove that they are living and have lived “stably” and “satisfactorily” for an uninterrupted period in their lives. However,

some Home Affairs branches do not implement these requirements fairly and consistently. Therefore, it is important to note that in response to the fifth question, some of us have the experience of having a letter from the psychologist and our medical practitioner, or hearing stories of girls just having to submit one.

Often, transgender woman's experience with the legal system is not a good one because of the ambiguities associated with changing your name and gender. The tropes that exist in the access to medical and psychological discussion – long waiting times, lack of financial aid and knowledge, difficulty gaining access – are present in the responses to question five. Avalon Keys notes that the process to change her gender “is an arduous process - especially for poor and dispossessed trans people. A letter from two medical professionals is needed, one of which needs to come from one's endocrinologist and another from a GP.” But it is important to note that changing your name and gender is the cheapest part of transitioning, because transgender women can go to Home Affairs and apply with their supporting documents. The application fee is below R100. Transgender women who do not have financial independence or aid won't be able to afford this without having the required documents, thereby putting them at a disadvantage and exposing them to institutional discrimination based on the disconnect between their gender representation and legal documents. For Vivienne Evans, “amending my forenames in the population registry was the easiest and painless process” but because she moved to a different country the difficulty increased. “I must submit two letters from two medical professionals of whom I have been a patient of, plus five completed forms to the South African embassy in Brussels because I relocated to Belgium to live and be with my husband. I will have to wait approximately six to nine months before I will have my gender marker amended, which means I will not be able to leave the EU until I have my new passport. Thus, in my opinion, a forename amendment is easier and quicker than a gender amendment.” Later Vivienne applied at the embassy and had a questionable experience with the officials.

Vivienne Evans forwarded me the email below in response to the embassy's handling of her application (Appendix 8).

In the email, Vivienne Evans details the treatment, bodily invasion, and gender discrimination she experienced from government officials in a foreign country. When Vivienne starts the email, she mentions the intersections of her identity as a transgender woman who now lives internationally and bares the social consequence of educating professionals and society about the lived realities of her life. Beginning the consultation at the embassy, Vivienne was

misgendered by the consultant. She then continues to describe how misgendering functions in society in the lives of transgender women, but also how society responds to corrections from minorities. “As a transgender woman this is not anything new as this consultant was not and will, definitely, not be the first nor last person to do so. I addressed this by telling her that my pronouns are she and her, however, I was completely disregarded and continuously misgendered by this individual.” Vivienne goes on to detail how invasive and persistent the consultants were by interrogating her with their questions about how her gender was altered and what genitals she has. She also details how psychologically and emotionally distressing it was to be in this situation. “It was extremely humiliating, dehumanising and a violation of my basic human as well as constitutional rights. If they had read the letters in the first place and were not so preoccupied with my genitalia, their questions would have been answered” (Appendix 8). Officials both locally and internationally are not educated on the legislation and services available to minority groups.

The officials then insisted that Vivienne would need to have GRS to have her sex description and sex status amended, and her documents should explicitly state this. Vivienne then continues to educate the officials by citing the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, requirements, providing resource materials by NGOs and letters from medical practitioners. In an extract from her email complaint she echoes the lived realities of transgender women:

This notion that transgender South Africans need to have sex reassignment surgery in order to change their gender markers is a preposterous and false interpretation of the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of 2003. This misconception reflects the idea that our affirmed gender as transgender people is illegitimate and that is a very dangerous perception to adhere to. People who live with gender dysphoria endure daily internal and external conflicts in relation to our genders. We face discrimination disproportionately than the rest of the general population and our unemployment rates are higher than any other group or sub-group within the global population. Our collective access to resources is minimal and extremely limited. We are 40% more likely to have suicidal thoughts and attempts than the general population. So, we do not get to ask people inappropriate questions regarding their genitalia because we are curious or unsure how to interpret the Constitution. If unsure, you always ask the person who knows more than you, even if that person is the one you are supposed to be assisting. In what community do you ask people about their genitalia and think it is

okay or appropriate? It happens in no other community than the trans community. Therefore, society as a whole has to do better when it comes to sensitivity, especially to those issues we do not understand and treat everyone with dignity and respect. When you wrong someone, offer a decent apology - not a flimsy "I don't think I have[n't] done anything wrong" kind of apology.<sup>38</sup> We are praised for our brilliant and progressive Constitution globally, however, it is a terrible shame when we violate the human and constitutional rights of our own with little sensitivity or thought. Therefore, I wish that this complaint serves as an eye opener to what you can do better when you interact with the trans community, especially when the individual is merely asking to claim their constitutional and basic human rights" (Appendix 8).

The email sent was viewed as insufficient by the officials at the Brussels Embassy and no response or apology was given to Vivienne. In ending the email, Vivienne details how challenging the lived experiences are for transgender women, many of whom face unemployment, psychological distress, discrimination, and a decreasing life expectancy.

For Don Maisel, requesting the letters from her medical practitioners was easy and quick, while others have not had the same experience. Cher Petersen notes that, "Home Affairs has taken almost two years to finalise the name change, which is disconcerting and irritating, considering that this application is [on]going since January 2018" (Appendix 5). Transgender women cannot apply for the alteration of their name and their sex description and sex status simultaneously; the one must be done before the other. Often the name change can be used as institutional motivation for the alteration of the sex description and sex status. For myself, "The experience for changing my name and gender marker was relatively easy. I did the name change first and then the gender marker change. For me, they took three and five months respectively to complete. The woman who helped me at DHA (Department of Home Affairs) in Wynberg, Cape Town was colored and trained to help trans people. The application cost for both is below R250 and does not need any consent from parents if you are over 18. I am lucky to have both of mine done in record time without any delays or hassles. I have heard many horror stories of girls waiting for their documents to come back" (Appendix 7). Although the application fee for the amendments for name and sex description are inexpensive, the letters from medical practitioners are expensive. It is important to note that, even though the participants have experiences ranging from no experience with the Act to having some or (like myself)

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<sup>38</sup> Dear reader – Please read this section twice. There is not enough emphasis in this world that would be sufficient for this response to a government institution on the lived realities of transgender women.



comprehensive understanding experience, their responses depict the institutional hurdles transgender women face in order to be recognised. Based on the responses, if transgender women cannot access the initial medical ‘intervention’ needed as a requirement, it means that they cannot change their sex description and sex status. Not having this legal recognition creates varying degrees of passing and access for transgender women and creates ambiguity around their identity. Therefore, it is important for cisgender professionals and service workers to mentor and assist transgender patients, students, and young professionals to bridge the access gap and grant opportunities for those already established (Jamie Veale 1).

For the final theme in this research study, we will discuss the **Communal-personal tensions** that are created because of the effects of passing. This section will also discuss the ways in which passing can be divisive and hierarchal in trans communities between those who do and those who do not pass. Many of the participants emphasise that through passing they are accepted, integrated and do not face being socially harassed or discriminated against as much. For Vivienne, “before medically transitioning, passing was the goal I was striving towards because I desperately wanted to avoid the continuous tyrants of public harassment and discrimination that I had been experiencing as an effeminate gender non-conforming individual” (Appendix 3). We can note that prior to passing, she was viewed as an ‘effeminate gender non-conforming individual’ and not cisgender and was therefore exposed to public and social violence. Cher Petersen confirms this in her response: “When I first started transitioning, I didn’t pass as well as I do now. There was definitely a lot of bullying, which had I passed I don’t think would have happened” (Appendix 5). Vivienne then continues to note the difficulties associated with acquiring employment prior to and after transitioning (passing) because of her ‘blackness’ or ‘queerness’. In her employment, the need for transgender women to pass became a standard that excludes transgender women who are at various stages of their transition and representation. Romy Johannes notes: “There have been times when I have been made fun [of] in public by cis men making rude comments saying, ‘What’s that? A man/female?’ So that pushed me to look softer and dress a certain way” (Appendix 6). This public humiliation and harassment, when internalised, pushes transgender women to want to attain the unrealistic standards set. Prior to transitioning, transgender women face a greater chance of being misgendered (referred to by the incorrect pronoun). Vivienne Evans experienced this at the embassy in Brussels, as well as Don Maisel who says: “Now that I pass with those (same) details it becomes difficult with an awkward conversation and having to annoyingly explain that you’re trans. It affects me less when I must explain I’m trans than when



I am misgendered” (Appendix 4). Don poignantly notes that “passing removes all the explanations” and this is one of the keyways transgender women escape social/public harassment, discrimination and misgendering.

In the responses of the participants, the politics of passing is greatly centred on access to public and private bathrooms. Avalon Keys notes that passing gives you an advantage to “navigating public spaces (especially bathrooms) easily” and without any opposition. Vivienne Evans notes that passing at her workplace she “faced little resistance from co-workers when it came to correct use of pronouns, public ostracization within the company and use of the bathroom facilities” (Appendix 3). For Don Maisel, she was told to use a different bathroom than the one that corresponded with her gender identity (female) when she did not pass. Cher Petersen in her response notes that things are getting better: “Now that I do pass, I do see a very big difference. I think there was a lack of access to things such as bathrooms that really put me off when I didn’t pass” (Appendix 5). The (unseen?) public restrictions on transgender aim to marginalise and reduces transgender individuals to body parts (genitals). The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act No. 4 of 2000 protects transgender women, “Subject to section 6, no person may unfairly discriminate against any person on the ground of gender, including...

(d) any practice, including traditional, customary, or religious practice, which impairs the dignity of women and undermines equality between women and men, including the undermining of the dignity and well-being of the girl child.

(e) any policy or conduct that unfairly limits access of women to land rights, finance, and other resources.

(g) limiting women’s access to social services or benefits, such as health, education and social security.”

However, transgender women often are not afforded reprieve from public and institutional harassment and discrimination. The specific sections indicated above in the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act No. 4 of 2000, should extend to transgender women pre- and post-transition to create greater access to healthcare, legal and social services, and most importantly recognition and protection in public. It is about transgender women existing in more than just public space.

To conclude our discussion, question six examines the tensions that passing creates within the transgender community. Avalon Keys notes that there exists tension between binary trans women and non-binary transgender people: “the former tends to be extremely elitist and condescending about trans people who do not align with binary expressions of gender.” Often trans individuals who do not pass or fall in the binary of gender are ridiculed and patronised about their representation. “This in-fighting has serious consequences, because while binary trans women are aspiring to the “norm” (cis-centred gender expression), it comes at the expense of non-binary trans people and their comfort navigating not just the world, but the transgender space” (Appendix 2). Some would think that the inclusion of all trans experiences will signify a dedication of the LGBTQIA+ community to include gender diversity; however, if it is at the expense of transgender women who do not conform, it becomes a hollow attempt at unity (Ashley Currier, 2015:93). Vivienne notes that passing creates ‘internal conflict’ within her because of the social standard it creates for transgender women, “especially for those [of us] coming from communities of colour” because “[o]ur community is already the most marginalised and under-resourced community within the broader LGBTQI+. This tension creates a further divide within the trans community” (Appendix 3). I experience the same type of internal conflict that Vivienne experiences: “This internal struggle then moves outwards based on my own issues. Tension within the community does not only come in the form of representation struggles, but also economic, medical, social and racial struggles” (Appendix 7). Vivienne points out that this internal struggle creates “unnecessary rivalry” among transgender as those who pass, such as herself, are not more valued than those who do not. This elitism in the community creates a divide that advantages transgender women who pass and have access over those who do not.

Passing in the transgender community focuses on transgender women who aspire to be or look cisgender and decentres the experiences of those who do not forgetting that “[t]rans women are women of their own experience” (Maisel, Appendix 4). Don Maisel continues to note that tension is caused when the benchmark to be cis-assumed is not met. Those who do not meet this benchmark are invalidated and excluded from the transgender experience. Within the community there is a sense of competition that exists to perform transness better and to be a better transwoman and this “places tensions in an already marginalised group and that’s counterintuitive” (Appendix 4). Cher Petersen notes that there is no recognition for transgender women who do not pass, and “[t]here’s a level of condescension that comes with being able to pass and you no longer want to interact with people who don’t pass.” Transgender women who

pass often remove themselves from the transgender narrative, the community, and all associations. Romy Johannes feels “that in the community there aren't that much of us trans females because in some way our community even push us aside just like the cis women / cis men” (Appendix 6). And transgender women must stick together, share resources, uplift and support each other to breach the existing tensions. The responses of the participants confirm that tensions that exist in society and the community are related to passing. Transgender women who do not pass are often further marginalised and oppressed by those who do. There exists a superiority and elitism with passing that privileges some women over other women and answers the question of this research study – at what cost? The cost of transgender women who do not pass and their own ties to the community.

#### **4.12 Conclusion**

To conclude this research chapter, based on the principal findings of this research study, passing creates varying degrees of privilege among transgender women. This is due to the proximity of the representation standards that the trans woman has obtained through clothing, makeup, hair, behaviour, hormones, and surgery.

The number of participants used for the interview was based on the analytical approach used and the type of research conducted. “By placing equal importance on knowledge building and aesthetics; attending to the ethical and relational implications of their work for themselves, participants and readers/audiences; and connecting personal experience to institutional, political, social and interpersonal relationships of power” allowed me to fairly and equally process the responses given to me (Holman Jones 2). Doing in-depth qualitative interviews with a small sample group of five participants proved to be the most efficient way to gather a data for this study.

The qualitative approach allowed the research to elaborate on the lives of transgender women and expose particular or unseen social trends and patterns that could better inform medical, psychological, legal, and social policies that govern gender. “Such work is crucial for understanding cultural change around transgender rights and developing policies that address transgender discrimination” (Schilt and Lagos 438). The change investigated and needed in this qualitative research is not bound to understanding only the influence on culture, but in

society, healthcare, and legislation. By examining other aspects of a trans woman's life we are given access into other complex and invisible experiences that deserve to be noticed. The narrative approach allows us to connect experiences to history, the everyday and existing literature that reflects on the ways that typifies modern inquiry and further deconstructing the margins in disciplines and meaning (Sandelowski 161).

The responses from the participants answer the research question put forth – whether race and socio-economic status affect the degree of passing and access attained and does this come at any cost to the transgender woman or the community. For the participants, race has afforded them the unique ability to pass in social, medical, and professional spaces especially because they were light-skinned and viewed as exotic. Being near to whiteness, transgender women who are light-skinned are afforded opportunity and access that their counterparts are not. This proximity also allows transgender women to escape and distance themselves from the associations that have been placed on black people: “[t]he theory around this means that being darker means being less attractive, manly or ugly” (Appendix 4). For transgender women who do not pass, these associations are attached to them and consequently they are then further marginalised in society. Transgender women often are humiliated and dehumanised based on the stereotypes associated with them. To remedy this, we would have to remove anti-blackness sentiments and the standards for transgender women. Public policies should be changed to better deliver essential services to transgender women.

Transgender women face countless hurdles when accessing healthcare services. Many of the services available to transgender women are scarce and expensive. Transgender medical and psychological professionals are limited and are often plagued with long waiting lists. This is echoed in the government system, where state funding, resources and professionals are limited. Transgender women who wish to access these services are forced to meet certain social requirements – they need to be independent or have some form of financial assistance. Without this, access is limited and the standards for passing are unattainable. The lack of medical and psychological professionals and funding limits transgender women from accessing legal and economic opportunities that could change and improve their lives. Instead, NGOs take on the responsibility of educating healthcare professionals and distributing services to the remote regions in South Africa. The process at government institutions and NGOs takes while to get through and transgender women who can afford it go private to avoid lengthy waiting periods. Funding your transition privately will be expensive based on the costs associated – pathology tests, doctors' fees and medication.

It is important for transgender women to share resources and experiences about their transitions to better help others who need it. It is also important to find a trans-friendly doctor who is informed and has experience in the treatment and application of transgender healthcare services. Often transgender women have to educate their healthcare practitioners and country officials on transgender issues, health and laws. It is important for practitioners and officials to be professional, supportive, and inclusive in their service delivery to trans patients/clients. A lack of training, education and legislation creates a decrease in the services available to transgender women. And an increase in these services would considerably improve the lived experiences, employment, and acceptance of transgender women. It is clear based on the responses of the applicants that legislation is not accurately applied to all transgender women when they apply to have their sex description and sex status. The requirements of this act remain invasive and insensitive to transgender women and reduces them to body parts and medical intervention. Vivienne Evans had a very specific interaction with officials that reduced, invaded, and interrogated her body as a transgender woman because they lacked the knowledge to accurately deliver constitutional services available to her. To access the privileges of the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act 9 of 2003, transgender women first need to overcome the hurdles to healthcare services. For transgender women who do overcome these hurdles, they are able to change their documentation and move freely without facing discrimination based on sex or gender. This documentation gives them access to housing, employment, education, and other social services. Without access to these services, transgender women remain the targets of social marginalisation, public harassment, and disproportionate acts of violence.

The tensions in the transgender community exist because passing creates unattainable, divisive, and elitist standards that exclude some and promote others. Passing places transgender women higher in the hierarchy above those who do not pass. This divide is also seen in the degrees of access attained by those who pass and those who do not. Transgender women who pass often distance themselves and look down on those who do not. Within the community, transgender women compete among themselves for the privileges of passing, forgetting “Trans women are women of their own experience” (Appendix 4). Therefore, transgender women who do not pass bear the consequences, (viewed as ugly, unemployment, lack of access of healthcare etc) of not passing.

Thus, our hypothesis is proved – Passing creates varying degrees of privilege based on socio-economic status and race that affects not only the transgender woman but the transgender

community in Cape Town. The medical, legal, and psychological requirements for transgender women ultimately limits the amount of access given and remains offensive, invasive, and unattainable by Western and not African regulations and standards.

## **CONCLUSION:**

### **Passing denouement**

**Concluding the realities and effects of passing on transgender women of colour and  
[possibly] how to overcome it**

The research in this study aimed to explore what passing is and the effects it has on transgender women in Cape Town, South Africa. We can conclude that passing, although detrimental, has become an integral part of a trans woman's journey to womanhood. Through the use of memory, cinematic media, Jean Livingstone's *Paris is Burning* (1991), and Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk and Steven Canals' *POSE* (2018), and the work of Janet Mock, *Surpassing Certainty* (2017), I was able to elucidate the different meanings and functions of passing in the lives of transgender women. This research study has also allowed me to prove that passing is not the standard by which transgender women are to be accepted and understood in society and that passing is ultimately unattainable and unrealistic in the society we live in. This study also echoes and puts into practice the work of Talia Bettcher which argues that "trans people are theorizing themselves for themselves" (2014:384). Focusing on the work that features, is produced by and includes trans women allowed me to centre the narratives and place particular emphasis on the existing struggles and highlight previously unseen struggles. This focus has also allowed me to root my study in existing trans literature and transgender theory.

Passing therefore has many meanings based on the context it is used in. In this research, passing was defined as a transgender person who is viewed or passes as cisgender. In Chapter 1, Billard describes passing as the successful attainment of aesthetics that belong to cisgender individuals and where a transgender individual must look cisgender (2019:3). To be viewed as cisgender, transgender individuals should have no trace of their assigned gender in order to be accepted and integrated. Mock notes that often when transgender individuals are viewed as cisgender, they are deemed duplicitous or as deceivers if their assigned sex at birth is revealed (2014:155). This stems from a lack of understanding gender, sex, and the lived experiences of transgender individuals. Forcing transgender women to denounce their life before their transition in order to pass and be viewed as their true self is a form of identity erasure and the removal of their history. This thesis also proves that passing is detrimental and unattainable but exists in society as a passage to womanhood.

This research has also allowed me to advocate for gender representation standards that incorporates both aspects of conforming and not conforming to gender. By placing the focus on a blend of the two extremes, successful gender representation should be possible and attainable. This would decrease the financial and social pressure to look a certain way in order for trans gender representation to be accepted, effectively decreasing the anxiety transgender individuals experience. Transgender women will then be able to set their own standards and definitions for gender and beauty. Through changing the form of this research, by switching



between the personal use of memories and academic reflections, I am able to set new standards and advocate for different approaches to academic writing. The use of autoethnography has allowed us to actively queer gender (and writing) norms through assembling in difference and practicing in different spaces and mediums. This thesis also advocates, through its form, the hybrid or mixed nature of transgender women of colour's race and gender identity.

Transgender womanhood in this thesis is viewed as an individual experience as part of a greater collective that shares and incorporates experiences from every woman. We can see from the work in Chapter 2: Righting (writing) passabilities, and Chapter 3: Women writing women, that the standards of representation and integration of transgender women depends on the requirements set for the dominant, heteronormative culture. In Chapter 2 we focus on discussing and exploring the core resources that have influenced this research investigation into the effects of passing on transgender women and their community. In this chapter we can see that the standards of beauty stem from the representation standards created for white cisgender women stem from the inspiration they get from celebrities, who get it from gay men, that got it from drag queens, who took their standards from transgender sex workers who had to exaggerate their feminine forms (Disclosure: 2020). *Paris is Burning* echoes that these standards come from the dominant culture that shapes society, institutions, and the media. These standards come through the form of categories that guide the representation of transgender women (in the ballroom) and in their becoming. In Chapter 3 we move through my personal experiences of my childhood and my becoming as a woman. This chapter also focuses on the influence of religion, coloured culture and my early years of gender discovery and transitioning. We can deduce that the journey to womanhood comes from sharing and relating to narratives that reflect yourself. In this chapter, through language and memory, I am able to explore and navigate the complicated and convoluted influences on how the woman in my life have written me and my womanhood into existence.

This research also aimed to shed light on the influences of race and the life of transgender women. Colourism is used as one of the main theoretical concepts to explain the ways in which gender representation is dependent on race, how certain privileges are created, and how transgender women are viewed because of it. What we can deduce from the influence of race and colourism is that it provides an experience that is not monied, privileged and white. Transgender women who are coloured, but light-skinned have a better chance of obtaining access to services, avoiding discrimination, and being socially accepted because of their proximity to the hegemonic experience. In the qualitative study conducted in Chapter 4:

“Women of their own experience: ‘In the Shoes of Another’”, we can see that transgender women faced less discrimination and gained more access to services because of their skin colour. They have also noted that it gives them an advantage over their peers who are not light-skinned. Some transgender women in their experience have also been exoticised and objectified because of their skin colour and how it adds to their individual beauty. Transgender women who are light-skinned and pass are viewed as less of a threat and more beautiful than their peers who were not, effectively escaping the stereotypes assigned to them.

In the final chapter we can also see that passing is only attained when you have overcome the numerous hurdles that inhibit your access to health and legal services. For transgender women who pass, their access has come with terms and conditions set by Western standards of gender regulation. These regulations politicise transgender bodies through invasive and unequal measures. In the qualitative study measuring the access of health and legal services available to transgender woman and we found that there exists a lack of understanding around their experience, journey and treatments to becoming. This lack of understanding can be seen in the limited education and training that exists for practitioners in South Africa relating to trans health and legal services. This limited education and training means there is a national shortage of practitioners that cannot successfully and sensitively meet the needs and wants of transgender women of colour. We can also see that existing regulations, treatments and measures that do exist are not known by many officials and healthcare practitioners; and are often unequally applied to transgender women. Although South Africa has come a long way in advancing the progressive laws around gender, it has to be pointed out that this has not resulted in “practical equality and the elimination of social differences” (Klein, 2009:15). Thus, the challenges transgender women face are not only socio-economic; they are political and relate to basic human rights and access to social services.

Within transgender communities, we also see the tension passing creates among queer individuals through varying degrees of privilege. We can see that transgender women who pass have access to education and finances but then often distance themselves from their communities. This distancing creates a sense of elitism within transgender women who pass, and those who do not end up resenting them. The incorporation of transgender women into their communities with those who do not pass is an important component to bridge the gap to access. Uniting together means that resources and information can be accurately and sensitively shared. There is a direct link to the narratives and experiences of women who have come before you. Bridging the gap will also highlight the narratives of those who do not pass and equalise

the representation standards for transgender women. However detrimental and unattainable passing may be, it has given many women the advantage they need to survive and be accepted. It has given them the opportunity to pave a better way forward for many others like them and they should use it!

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## Appendix 1

On passing: Qualitative research study questions used to interview participants.

On *Passing*: Que(e)rying the appropriation of (cis)gender aesthetics by trans women.

Elana Leah Ryklief

Stellenbosch University – Interview Questions

June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2019

In this interview, you will be asked to reflect on your experience as transgender woman in Cape Town, South Africa, who pass. Passing and the experience of passing varies with transgender women experiencing its (dis)advantages differently.

With the experiences of transgender women in Western media increasing, this interview would in return centre and highlight the experiences of women of colour in Cape Town and how passing has affected the lived experience.

### Questions

1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?
2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?
3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?
4. What has your experience been accessing medical/psychological services in order to transition?
5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?
6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?

**\*\* END \*\***

## Appendix 2

Interview results of participant 1, Avalon Keys, 25 years old, Uitenhage, Eastern Cape, South Africa.

### **1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?**

Passing is a double-edged sword. The advantages vary, from quicker "acceptance" (term used loosely) by cis-society, navigating public spaces (especially bathrooms) easily, and blending into a crowd for the most part.

The disadvantages of passing are mainly concentrated in the romantic and sexual arenas. Men are attracted to trans women until they find out that we are trans, not cis. It makes things awkward and shuts down potential romance with lightning speed. We pass to the point where we are read as cisgender, and considered as viable romantic partners, only for that to be swiftly undone with an "unmatch" or being "ghosted", as the kids say.

### **2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?**

Society holds various standards for passing, and many of these are rooted in classist and racist ideals of beauty: a petite or curvy body is a must, anything in-between calls into question one's authenticity in performing womanhood. This affects not only trans women, but cis women too (i.e. the notion of being "built like a man").

The standards for passing also go above and beyond the standards that cis women follow. Trans women must always be presentable, never have a strand of facial hair, a light and airy voice, beautiful makeup but 'not drag queen makeup', and walk in heels better than cis women. If these seem arbitrary and nonsensical, that is because these standards are exactly that.

### **3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?**

Race and passing are intertwined, without a shadow of a doubt. Black cis women are not considered 'real women' due to racial antagonism from Whiteness as a construct, which sought

and still seeks to position itself as the pinnacle of beauty and humanness. But we are not focusing on cis women today. As a light-skinned coloured woman, I have most certainly been afforded material and social privileges that my black counterparts simply do not get. And when one tries to interrogate the source of these privileges, it becomes abundantly clear that my lighter skin:

- A) Minimizes me as a general threat in society
- B) Prioritises my feelings and sentiments over the valid ones of my black trans counterparts
- C) Allows me to be as loud as I want without demonizing me for being "an angry black woman"

These are just some of the musings I have personally experienced and seen voiced in innumerable contexts regarding passing and race (specifically colourism).

#### **4. What has your experience been when accessing medical/psychological services to transition?**

Accessing gender-affirming medical care is outrageously expensive and notoriously difficult due to a variety of reasons.

For instance, my GP was absolutely clueless about transitioning medically, to the point where I had to educate her on Hormone Replacement Therapy. Needless to say, it was in my best interest to essentially bankrupt myself by seeing a specialist (an endocrinologist).

I got the referral and luckily my appointment which was literally months away was moved up. I had my first consultation with Dr Hough, a well-known endocrinologist in Port Elizabeth who specialises in HRT and has experience treating transgender patients, on the 31st of July 2018. The consultation was an eye watering R1800 for half an hour, paid upfront (no medical aid). I received a 6-month script and started my hormones on the 5th of August 2018. I recently celebrated one year on HRT and it has been the best decision of my life so far.

Unfortunately, Port Elizabeth does not benefit from government assistance in providing free gender-affirming healthcare like Groote Schuur does. (By the way, it is the only hospital in the country to do so.)

There are other organisations, such as WITS RHI, in connection with USAID, that are trying to provide these services all over the country for free. At the moment, there is not a doctor to

sign off on scripts for the hormones, but Prep (pre-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV) is provided free of charge. Hopefully, the programme will be in full effect soon, as paying R1000 a month for hormones is absolutely ridiculous.

Also, medical aid does not cover HRT as chronic medication, not even for cisgender women going through menopause. It is incredibly difficult from multiple angles.

**5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?**

I have not yet applied for the legal changes regarding the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, but again, it is an arduous process - especially for poor and dispossessed trans people. A letter from two medical professionals is needed, one of which needs to come from one's endocrinologist and another from a GP.

**6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?**

Passing creates a lot of tension in the trans community, especially between binary trans women and non-binary trans people.

The former tends to be extremely elitist and condescending about trans people who do not align with binary expressions of gender. This also infiltrates transitioning standards, where binary trans women will ridicule non-binary trans femmes for not wanting to start hormones nor have any surgeries (especially vaginoplasty).

These binary trans women are referred to as 'truscum', a term which essentially identifies them as expecting all trans people to have the same, uniform experience of gender (including debilitating dysphoria and genital shame).

This in-fighting has serious consequences, because while binary trans women are aspiring to the "norm" (cis-centred gender expression), it comes at the expense of non-binary trans people and their comfort navigating not just the world, but the transgender space.

### Appendix 3

Interview results of participant 2, Vivienne Evans, 26 years old, originally from Clanwilliam, Western Cape, South Africa, now residing in Belgium.

#### **1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?**

As a transgender woman I have a very complex relationship with passing. Before medically transitioning, passing was the goal I was striving towards because I desperately wanted to avoid the continuous tyrants of public harassment and discrimination that I had been experiencing as an effeminate gender non-conforming individual. I face less public harassment; however, I started to experience more unwanted sexual advancements from men who were attracted to me.

In terms of employment opportunities at the beginning, being transgender was very difficult whilst I was an active member within the job market. After graduating from SU with a B.Com degree with no prior work experience and going to several interviews for various positions for which I was being rejected because of either my blackness or my queerness, I finally gained entry into the job market and was employed as an online language instructor at a language centre in Durbanville. I became the first transgender employee at the company and because I passed within the general cis society, the working environment was easier to navigate for me personally. I faced little resistance from co-workers when it came to correct use of pronouns, [no] public ostracisation within the company, and [could] use the [female] bathroom facilities.

I pass in general cis society and because of my luck with the genetic lottery, it then became the standard at my previous employer for other trans women to look, speak and act like me - it gave me an advantage; however, I didn't like that it was set as the norm for trans women, who regardless of what stage of their transition they are in, are also eligible to perform the same tasks professionally as I did.

#### **2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?**

In my opinion, to successfully pass there are a few (arbitrary) factors or so-called requirements that trans women have to consider passing as cis-gender. The very first one would be gender expression. Although there are a variety of ways in which womanhood can be exuded, a hyper

effeminate expression of gender is generally required and preferred for trans women to ‘conceal’ their assigned gender. Factors that constitute gender expression include feminine clothes (such as dresses, skinny, high-waisted or slender jeans, blouses, shorts and the list goes on), nail polish, shoes (such as wedges, block heels and high-heeled boots), and of course hair – the longer your hair is, the more feminine you are perceived to be. Secondly, gendered mannerisms in public spaces are also a contributing factor to passing. Mannerisms such as hand gestures, the way you walk and the way you talk are all things trans women have to think of if they want to pass when they are in public. Thirdly, other requirements would include the tone and depth of your voice, facial shape, visibility of your Adam’s apple, how well you “tuck” (tucking is known as the process of concealing your genitalia), and lastly the shape and size of both your hands and feet can be physical features that can be included in the arbitrary requirements of passing.

### **3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?**

As someone who is situated precisely in the middle of the skin tone or racial spectrum, I am too brown or not light enough to be white and too light to be considered ‘completely’ black. My skin tone has been the cause of many compliments that were rooted in exoticism because my brown tone looks like coffee with milk and my curly hair just exacerbates my exotic features – so I have been told. Mixing my exotic features with my ability to pass contributes to being seen as a beautiful woman, which then also grants me pretty privilege. Thus, due to the fact that I pass mixed with not completely being dark skinned, I am seen as more desirable. In these ways, my skin tone has indeed affected my degree of passing.

### **4. What has your experience been when accessing medical/psychological services to transition?**

During my time at SU, I visited the SSVO (Sentrum vir Studentevoorigting en -ontwikkeling) centre during March 2016 because I felt emotionally, mentally and psychologically drained. I had started living fully as a transwoman and not just blurring the lines between gender as a gender non-conformist. Although SU granted me the freedom and safety to express and explore, it also came with great psychological labour and I had thus reached my breaking point.

I then decided to access psychological services at SSVO, however, from my sessions with the counsellor, I felt that she was not fully equipped to assist a student like me and after three or four sessions, I stopped attending.

While I was unemployed for nearly ten months at home after graduation, my anxiety with regards to medically transitioning and acquiring the finances for it was at an ultimate high because I knew I couldn't expect my mom to financially assist me seeing [as] she too was unemployed at the time. So, once I landed my first job in November 2017, I immediately started researching for a trans-friendly doctor to assist with my medical transition. I had decided to skip the waiting line of Groote Schuur, the only public institution assisting trans women in accessing hormones and went privately. Luckily for me, I met some of my best friends who have now become my sisters at SU, and we all transitioned together. We shared the resources that we had amongst each other and ultimately all went to the same doctor in Rondebosch who prescribed our hormones. Medical transitioning is very expensive and because I was an independent, educated and employed trans-woman of colour, the costs associated with hormones was a no-brainer for me. I saw it as a long-awaited gift to myself from myself.

**5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?**

In all honesty, amending my forenames in the population registry was the easiest and painless process. I have not officially changed my gender marker yet; however, it is a more tedious process than a forename amendment. I must submit two letters from two medical professionals of whom I have been a patient of plus five completed forms to the South African embassy in Brussels because I relocated to Belgium to live and be with my husband. I will have to wait approximately six to nine months before I will have my gender marker amended, which means I will not be able to leave the EU until I have my new passport. Thus, in my opinion, a forename amendment is easier and quicker than a gender amendment.

**6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?**

Personally, passing creates internal conflict within me because as I have previously mentioned, just because I pass doesn't mean that my version of passing should be the standard for all trans women, especially not for those of us coming from communities of colour. We all do not have the same access to opportunities, and we all are not lucky enough to win the genetic lottery at birth which assists in a trans woman's ability to pass.

As for the community at large, there is an unnecessary rivalry that is created within the trans community which stems from passing and this creates tensions between trans women who pass and those who do not. Our community is already the most marginalised and under-resourced community within the broader LGBTQI+ community. This tension creates a further divide within the trans community. I am not more valued because of my level of passability than my fellow sisters who aren't as passable as what I am.



## **Appendix 4**

Interview results of participant 3, Don Maisel, 24 years old, Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa.

### **1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?**

For me, I have lived as a trans woman who did not pass, after some time [I] passed more often. Initially when I was not passing as a woman, I suppose I was being misgendered often – told to use a different bathroom to what I was comfortable. It made navigating the world uncomfortable. My ID [with] my previous gender details made it easier when I did not pass, and the bank could correlate this. Now that I pass with those same details it becomes difficult with an awkward conversation and having to annoyingly explain that you are trans. It affects me less when I must explain I am trans than when I am misgendered. Passing has brought me so many privileges. Now when I am seen in public, I am myself in different spaces. There are still awkward spaces because passing is not a homogenous experience. Passing removes all the explanations. An alternative to passing is renaming the concept too ‘cis-assumed’. Live in a society that has predetermined notions about gender, a person who assumes your gender as cisgender this assumption is correct.

### **2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?**

For different people, their gender requirements are often homogenous and informed by mainstream culture. But at the same time, we need to look at the requirements assigned to cisgender women. However, there are many different phenotypes of gender. Not all women are going to perform gender in the same way. I do not think as a trans women you have to tick all these boxes of femininity because this is unrealistic.

### **3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?**

I am considered coloured, which I consider to be mixed race. I am light-skinned, that I am of colour and not white, and have kinky hair structure. I think to a degree it has helped me pass

more. It has a lot to do with colourism and racism. The theory around this means that being darker means being less attractive, manly, or ugly, but as a light-skinned person I am not assumed to be those things. I hate to refer to this, but it is true related mine and other's experiences that I have heard and what they have told me. I do not think at any point my skin colour has disadvantaged me in any way because I pass based on South Africa's racial context and history as well as anti-blackness amongst coloured people. When you are considered conventionally pretty, it adds to your ability to pass, it allows you to look past the stubble, chin and Adam's apple.

#### **4. What has your experience been when accessing medical/psychological services to transition?**

My process, I did try to access counselling services haphazardly through my university campus. I went to three of them who just did not understand what I was going through while figuring it out. They struggled to deal with what it means to be transgender; I was inexperienced myself and not well versed, speaking to and dealing with a gender questioning person. Then I went to a psychologist who deals with my experience [which] made it easier. I accessed this through an NGO and [thy] put me in contact. After she decided I was comfortable enough with my gender she referred me to the government hospital. I had to see a psychiatrist and then [go on] a waiting list for the endocrinologist. This whole process took about a year. It took four months before receiving hormones after the consultation. Many people wait much longer for these services. The psychiatrist mentioned I looked so feminine and could not place me as her patient because I pass. You do not look transgender because you are so feminine. It forced me think that because I pass it was easier to gain access.

#### **5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?**

I haven't gone through the process of changing my gender marker and ID number. I have requested the two letters to change it. That process went quick.

**6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?**

Both in my community and myself there are tense issues. The first thing is passing as a concept that focuses on the experience of transwomen who want to appear cisgender as [a] social test. Trans women are women of their own experience. The benchmark causes tension. If you do not aspire to pass, then you are not really trans and not experiencing the 'true' experience. This distorts and invalidates other people who do not pass. I think within trans women who aim to pass there is a sense of competition, those who pass better are a better trans woman and you are doing transness better places tensions in an already marginalised group that is counterintuitive. The work that I did to look a certain way and perceived a certain way has been difficult and uncomfortable. The bad thoughts feed to the dysphoria. Now that I mostly pass, it's a privilege that I hold.

## **Appendix 5**

Interview results of participant 4, Cher Petersen, 26 years old, Observatory, Cape Town, South Africa.

### **1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?**

When I first started transitioning, I didn't pass as well as I do now. There was definitely a lot of bullying which, had I passed, I do not think would have happened. Now that I do pass, I do see a very big difference. I think there was a lack of access to things such as bathrooms that really put me off when I didn't pass.

### **2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?**

I think it differs for everyone. I think the view on what is feminine has shifted. There needs to be a sense of comfortability and almost a sense of confidence. But passing is genetic: you either look more typically feminine, female or cisgender. If you think about it, soft jaw, smaller face, slightly bigger forehead that is beautifully rounded, brow bone ridges are seen clockable, also a smaller nose with bigger eyes.

### **3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?**

I think I pass better around white people than I do around coloured people. I also pass around black people. I am coloured myself, so, for some or other reason I get clocked by people of my own race more and people of other races.

### **4. What has your experience been when accessing medical/psychological services to transition?**

It took me a while to do the work myself and access these services. But I did use Triangle Project in Cape Town for psychological services – which was pretty simple. I made an

appointment, then got it. And then medical services – I contacted a doctor recommended by a friend's colleague. It is quite expensive, but it is what one needs to transition.

**5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?**

I have not gotten to change my gender marker because I have not even had my name change. Home Affairs has taken almost two years to finalise the name change, which is disconcerting and irritating, considering that this application is [on]going since January 2018. But once I have the name change done, I will be able to do the gender marker. I have heard from other people that there are places in Cape Town that it can happen fairly quickly. I would be looking to do that.

**6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?**

I know it affects trans women who don't pass. I know it makes them feel slightly dysphoric, when they see someone who passes well and does not give them recognition. There is a level of condescension that comes from being able to pass and you no longer want to interact with people who don't pass. I think that is the idea people have; it's not necessarily true. I do think there's tensions among the trans community relating to passing. Although you have trans/non-binary people [who] don't want to pass and want to traverse on the spectrum.

## Appendix 6

Interview results of participant 5, Romy Johannes, 27 years old, Durbanville, Cape Town, South Africa.

### **1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?**

Well, what I have experienced as a trans female still in my beginning stage process, one seems to overthink a lot because you either don't want to be pointed out in public or made fun of so I would always make sure that I look proper and more as a female so I would feel comfortable and knowing people won't out me. The pressure of passing is very much a personal problem and a society issue, because we get pressure from what society sees as a woman and then we see fault in ourselves as trans females. I would make sure that I would have no 5 o' clock shadow show on my face and the hair which I buy suits me so I can look more feminine, even the clothing that I buy myself so that I can be comfortable but still feminine can pass. There have been times when I have been made fun of in public by cis men making rude comments saying. '[W]hat's that? A man/female?' So that pushed me to look softer and dress a certain way.

### **2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?**

The requirements for most trans females would be that to make certain parts of your body to try and look more feminine or the way one speaks vocally or even your body posture. We would make sure that we have our nails, hair and clothing be more feminine and even do things like laser surgeries so that one can pass in society so that you will not be pointed out in society. We would groom ourselves so that we won't have facial hairs growing or wear things to slim our bodies or hands must so that we can feel and fit in the world.

### **3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?**

Well for me personally I would have to say no because in South Africa we have different types of women and different cultures, but for me the women that I have seen and grown up around

have been strong, hard workers, running the household. So I would say I have seen how a woman should be and the traits which they have by the movement of the body, smile in the face, and how they dress themselves when going out and how they interact around other females in a room.

**4. What has your experience been when accessing medical/psychological services to transition?**

I have had a good process when it comes to accessing medical treatment from my doctor before I started my process as a trans female. My doctor spoke to me about the process and made sure that I know that it's a process and that things won't just happen overnight, but he also asked me why I am wanting to do this and what made me make this choice. I feel welcomed when I go to my doctor and that I am in a safe space when going to him to get my check ups and hormones and he would always ask how the process is going and as a patient it makes me feel good that my doctor is interested in how I am and the process of me becoming my true self.

**5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?**

I am still new to the process, so I haven't dealt much with any of these issues yet, because I haven't gone forth yet with any documentation about changing my sex, name or other personal information. I am focusing currently on my transition process which I'm going through.

**6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?**

I feel that in the community there aren't that much of us trans female because in some way our community even push us aside just like the cis women / cis men. So, we as trans females we should first try and educate our own community about us because they do not know enough about us. We as trans woman should uplift each other because we even are a certain way between each other, and we need [to] make sure that we can help each other out when we can because so much happens to us as trans woman in the world. I feel that we should love ourselves

and not put so much pressure on ourselves and we should make our community understand us more and they need to fight for our rights to because we are part of the rainbow family.



## **Appendix 7**

Interview results of participant 6 and researcher, Elana Leah Ryklief, 25 years old from Cape Town, Western Cape, South Africa.

### **1. Can you describe the ways in which passing has (dis)advantaged your life in Cape Town?**

Passing has given me access to spaces that not many transgender women can access. My experience with healthcare, employment and social engagements have been relatively easy compared to other trans women. Because of my ability to pass, I have been given the opportunity to be more vocal about trans issues and be taken seriously for it. I also face less discrimination. Passing has disadvantaged me, it has made me unaware of the issues and discrimination other trans women experience.

### **2. In your opinion, what are the requirements to successfully pass in society?**

The requirements for trans and cis women in society are not the same. This creates different degrees of acceptance based on your face, hair, clothes, body structure, shoes, and social behavior. For all these things must be closely aligned with the requirements given to ciswomen – clear skin, no facial hair, small body etc. Transgender women are not supposed to look too manly or have any manly features but cannot be overly feminine or it would deem them invalid.

### **3. Has your race (skin colour) affected the degree of passing you have acquired in the South African context?**

Being light-skinned in South Africa has given me some advantage over other cis and trans individuals. Because of my proximity to whiteness I am deemed as no threat, somewhat competent, and my voice is heard more often than other trans women. This proximity allows me to be viewed as attractive and privileged in some contexts. It has given me access to predominantly white spaces in education, employment, and social groups.

**4. What has your experience been when accessing medical/psychological services to transition?**

Accessing medical and psychological services was easy. I did not heavily depend on the psychological services that was offered to me at university, I consulted them rarely but for only record/documentation purposes. I skipped the ‘absurd’ requirement for psychological evaluation before taking hormone therapy and started my medical transition privately. Starting it via Groote Schuur hospital requires you to be on a waiting list, get the evaluation and then getting the hormone treatment. I started my transition privately because I could afford it, however expensive it was. Being on the hormones for a year, I later could not afford it, I moved over to GSH without the need for evaluation to get my hormones through the public health system.

**5. What has your experience been with the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status, Act 49 of 2003, to change your gender marker and ID number in contrast to changing your name, if any?**

The experience for changing my name and gender marker was relatively easy. I did the name change first and then the gender marker change. For me, they took three and five months respectively to complete. The woman who helped me at DHA (Department of Home Affairs) in Wynberg, Cape Town was colored and trained to help trans people. The application cost for both is below R250 and does not need any consent from parents if you are over 18. I am lucky to have both of mine done in record time without any delays or hassles. I have heard many horror stories of girls waiting for their documents to come back.

**6. Are you aware of any tensions that passing creates within the trans community or yourself?**

I have always struggled with my representation and comparing it to other trans girls. The internal struggle for me comes through as gender dysphoria that could be alleviated through passing. However, passing should not be based on looking cis in any way. This internal struggle then moves outwards based on my own issues. Tension within the community does not only come in the form of representation struggles, but also economic, medical, social and racial struggles.

## Appendix 8

Email from Vivienne Evans after attempting to submit her application for the alteration of sex description and sex status on her ID documents.

From: Vivienne Rose Evans

Date: Fri, 6 Mar 2020, 13:49

Subject: Civil Service Complaint

To all to whom this may concern,

I trust this email finds you well.

My name is Vivienne Rose Evans and I would hereby like to lay a formal civil service complaint against the administrators and staff of the South African Embassy in Brussels.

On Monday, 2nd March 2020, at 10:00 I had an appointment with Ms. X<sup>39</sup> to apply for my gender marker amendment. At first, I was extremely excited to take the next legal step in my transition as a transgender South African woman, however, after my appointment I was left feeling utterly dismayed, traumatised, and dehumanised by the staff members.

Firstly, I would like to stress the fact that as a transgender woman of colour, I am constantly living at the intersections of my race, gender, and queerness. Due to my lived experiences I have therefore (unfortunately) grown accustomed to educating people who are ignorant on issues concerning race, gender, and queer identity.

When I went up to the first consultant and stated my reason for the appointment, she immediately misgendered me. As a transgender woman this is not anything new as this consultant was not and will definitely not be the first nor last person to do so. I addressed this by telling her that my pronouns are she and her, however, I was completely disregarded and continuously misgendered by this individual.

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<sup>39</sup> The names of individuals will be left out for ethical purposes, but the honesty and truth of the participants experience will be represented.

Secondly, when I asked Ms. X a question regarding the gender section on the application forms, she was not sure how to answer me. Furthermore, they questioned how my gender had been altered after they were already in possession of my three medical reports from my medical professionals confirming my gender dysphoria diagnosis as well as gender reassignment through medical reassignment therapy. They then took it up a notch and proceeded by asking me very intrusive questions regarding my body and what surgeries I have or have not had. I of course answered that my gender has been medically altered as stated in my medical reports, which lead to more (supposed) confusion. They then continue to persist in asking me invasive questions regarding my genitals as if it was any of their concern or business. It was extremely humiliating, dehumanising and a violation of my basic human as well as constitutional rights. If they had read the letters in the first place and were not so preoccupied with my genitalia, their question would have been answered.

They informed me that they did not have much knowledge concerning the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of 2003 and therefore they sought advice and/or information from their superiors.

After their quest for knowledge, I was called aside by Ms. X and then asked again whether or not I have had sex reassignment surgery (SRS). She adamantly persisted that I am unable to amend my gender marker on my national documents because my recommendation letters do not explicitly state that surgical intervention has occurred.

According to the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of 2003, any person whose sexual characteristics have been altered by surgical or medical treatment resulting in gender reassignment may apply to the Director-General of the National Department of Home Affairs for the alteration of the sex description on his or her birth register.

An application contemplated in subsection (1) must:

- (a) be accompanied by the birth certificate of the applicant,
- (b) in the case of a person whose sexual characteristics have been altered by surgical or medical treatment resulting in gender reassignment, be accompanied by reports stating the nature and results of any procedures carried out and any treatment applied prepared by the medical practitioners who carried out the procedures and applied the treatment or by a medical practitioner with experience in the carrying out of such procedures and the application of such treatment.

(c) in every case in which sexual characteristics have been altered resulting in gender reassignment, be accompanied by a report, which has been prepared by a medical practitioner other than the one contemplated in paragraph (17) who has medically examined the applicant in order to establish his or her sexual characteristics.

I have attached a document that I found on Gender Dynamix, which is a NGO based in Cape Town, providing guidelines to medical professionals for medical reporting on transgender South Africans who would like to change their gender markers on their national documents. This NGO has gone to great lengths in breaching the divide between the transgender community, medical professionals, journalists, and the government. In their document, on page 2 of 4, you will find the specific phrases that are required in each of the two different kinds of medical reports for transgender women.

I have also attached my three medical reports from three of my doctors. The first one, Script - Vivienne Rose, is a handwritten report from my doctor who is based in Cape Town. The second one is from my psychologist in Belgium who performed a second confirmation of my gender dysphoria diagnosis. The last one is from my current Belgian endocrinologist who is my primary physician in my transition.

This notion that transgender South Africans need to have sex reassignment surgery in order to change their gender markers is a preposterous and false interpretation of the Alteration of Sex Description and Sex Status Act of 2003. This misconception reflects the idea that our affirmed gender as transgender people is illegitimate and that is a very dangerous perception to adhere to. People who live with gender dysphoria endure daily internal and external conflicts in relation to our genders. We face discrimination disproportionately than the rest of the general population and our unemployment rates are higher than any other group or sub-group within the global population. Our collective access to resources is minimal and extremely limited. We are 40% more likely to have suicidal thoughts and attempts than the general population. So, we do not get to ask people inappropriate questions regarding their genitalia because we are curious or unsure how to interpret the Constitution. If unsure, you always ask the person who knows more than you, even if that person is the one you are supposed to be assisting. In what community do you ask people about their genitalia and think it is okay or appropriate? It happens in no other community than the trans community. Therefore, society as a whole has to do better when it comes to sensitivity, especially to those issues we do not understand and treat

everyone with dignity and respect. When you wrong someone, offer a decent apology - not a flimsy "I don't think I haven't [sic] done anything wrong" kind of apology<sup>40</sup>.

We are praised for our brilliant and progressive Constitution globally, however, it is a terrible shame when we violate the human and constitutional rights of our own with little sensitivity or thought. Therefore, I wish that this complaint serves as an eye opener to what you can do better when you interact with the trans community, especially when the individual is merely asking to claim their constitutional and basic human rights.

Yours sincerely,

*Vivienne R. Evans*

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<sup>40</sup> Dear reader – Please read this section twice. There is not enough emphasis in this world that would be sufficient for this response to a government institution on the lived realities of transgender women.